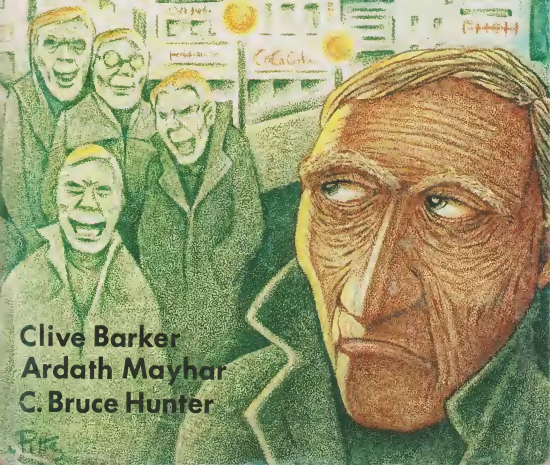


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FANTASY TALES

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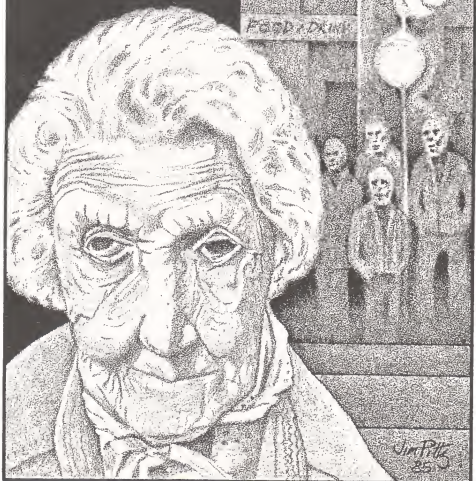
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STEPHEN JONES, Editor.

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**A PSYCHOLOGICAL
GHOST STORY
BY THE MODERN
MASTER OF
HORROR...**



"She looked frail as a grey-haired child."

The Sneering

By RAMSEY CAMPBELL

Illustration by JIM PITTS

WHEN they'd come home the house had looked unreal, dwarfed by the stalks of the streetlamps, which were more than twice as tall as any of the houses that were left. Even the pavement outside had shrunk, chopped in half by the widened roadway. Beneath the blazing orange light the house looked like cardboard, a doll's house; the dark green curtains were black now, as if charred. It didn't look at all like his pride. "Isn't it nice and bright," Emily had said.

Bright! Seen from a quarter of a mile away the lights were ruthlessly dazzling: Stark fluorescent stars pinned to the earth, floating in a swath of cold orange light watery as mist. Outside the house the light was at least as bright as day; it was impossible to look at the searing lamps.

Jack lay in bed. The light had kept him awake again, seeping through the curtains, accumulating thickly in the room. The curtains were open now; he could see the lower stretch of a towering metal stalk, gleaming in the July sunlight. Progress. He let out a short breath, a mirthless comment. Progress was what mattered now, not people.

Not that the lights were the worst. There was the incessant jagged chattering and slow howling of machinery: Would they never finish the roadworks? They'd finish a damn sight faster if they spent less time idling, telling vulgar jokes and drinking tea. And when the men had sneaked off home there was still the traffic, roaring by past midnight, past one o'clock, carrying the racket of passengers, shouting drunkenly and singing - the drivers too, no doubt: They didn't care, these people. Once or twice he'd leapt out of bed to try to spot the numbers of the cars, but Emily would say "Oh, leave them. They're only young people." Sometimes he thought she must walk about with her eyes shut.

The machinery was silent. It was Sunday. The day of rest, or so he'd been brought up to believe. But all it meant now was an early start for the cars, gathering speed on the half-mile approach to the motorway: Cars packed with ignorant parents and their ill-spoken children, hordes of them from the nearby council estate. At least they would be dropping their litter in the country, instead of outside his house.

He could hear them now, the cars, the constant whirring, racing past only to make way for more. They sounded as if they were in the house. Why couldn't he hear Emily? She'd got up while he was asleep, tired out of wakefulness. Was she making him a pot of tea? It seemed odd that he couldn't hear her.

Still, it was a wonder he could hear anything over the unmannerly din of traffic. The noise had never been so loud before; it filled the house. Suddenly, ominously, he realized why. The front door was open.

Struggling into his dressing-gown, he hurried to the window. Emily was standing outside the shop across the road, peering through the speckled window. She had forgotten it was Sunday.

Well, that was nothing to worry about. Anyone could forget what day it was, with all this noise. It didn't sound like Sunday. He'd best go and meet Emily. It was dim in the pedestrian subway, her walk wasn't always steady now; she might fall. Besides, one never knew what hooligans might be lurking down there.

He dressed hastily, dragging clothes over his limbs. Emily stood hopefully outside the shop. He went downstairs rapidly but warily: His balance wasn't perfect these days. Beneath the hall table with its small vase of flowers, an intruding ball of greasy paper had lodged. He poked it out with one foot and kicked it before him. The road could have it back.

As he emerged he heard a man say "Look at that stupid old cow."

Two men were standing outside his gate. From the man's coarse speech he could tell they were from the estate. They were staring across the road at Emily, almost blocking his view of her. She stood at the edge of the pavement, at a break in the temporary metal fence, waiting for a chance to cross. Her mind was wandering again.

He shoved the men aside. "Who are you frigging pushing?" demanded the one who'd spoken - but Jack was standing on tiptoe at the edge of the traffic, shouting "Emily! Stay there! I'm coming! Emily!"

She couldn't hear him. The traffic whipped his words away, repeatedly shuttered him off from her. She stood peering through a mist that stank of petrol, she made timid advances at gaps in the traffic. She was wearing her blue leaf-patterned dress; gusts from passing cars plucked at it. In her fluttering dress she looked frail as a grey-haired child.

"Stay there, Emily!" He ran to the subway. Outside his gate the two men gaped after him. He clattered down the steps and plunged into the tunnel. The darkness blinded him for a moment, gleaming darkly with graffiti; the chill of the tiled passage touched him. He hurried up the steps on the far side, grabbing the metal rail to quicken his climb. But it was too late. Emily had crossed to the middle of the roadway.

Calling her now would confuse her. There was a lull in the traffic, but she stood on the long concrete island, regaining her breath. Cross now! he willed her desperately. The two men were making to step onto the road. They were going to help the stupid old cow, were they? He ran to the gap in the metal fence. She didn't need them.

She had left the island, and he was running to it, when he saw the car. It came rushing around the curve toward Emily, its wide nose glittering silver. "Emily, watch out!" he shouted.

She turned and stood bewildered in the roadway. The men had seen the car; they retreated to the pavement, gesturing at Emily. "Get back!" they shouted, overlapping, confusing.

He couldn't reach her in time. The car rushed toward her. He saw the driver in his expensive silver-painted frame: Young, cocksure, aggressive, well-groomed

yet coarse as a workman's hands - everything Jack hated, that threatened him. He should have known it would be such a man that would take Emily from him.

The driver saw Emily, dithering in his path. His sidewhiskered face filled with the most vicious hatred Jack had ever seen. He wrenched at the wheel. The car swooped round Emily, coiling her with a thick swelling tentacle of dust. As she stood trembling, one back wheel thudded against the kerb outside the house. The car slewed across the roadway toward the lamp-standard. Jack glimpsed the hate-filled face in the moment before it became an explosion of blood and glass.

Emily was running aimlessly, frantically, as if her ankles were cuffed together. She staggered dizzily and fell. She lay on the road, sobbing or giggling. The two men went to her, but Jack pushed them away. "We don't want your help, thank you. Nor yours either," he told the drivers emerging from their halted cars. But he accepted Dr. Tumilty's help, when the doctor hurried over from glancing at the driver, for Emily was beginning to tremble, and didn't seem to recognize the house. More drivers were gathering to stare at the crash. Soon Jack heard the approaching raucous howl of the police. The only thought he could find in his head was that they had to be deafening in order to shout everyone else's row down.

"WHAT are you doing?"
"Just looking."

She turned from the front-room window to smile at him. Looking at what, for heaven's sake? his frown demanded. "I like watching people go by," she said.

He could see no people: Only the relentless cars, dashing harsh sunlight at his house, flinging dust. Still, perhaps he should be grateful she could look. It seemed the doctor had been right: She didn't remember the accident.

That had been a week ago. Luckily the doctor had seen it happen; the police had questioned him. A policeman had interrogated Jack, but had left Emily alone, calmed by a sedative. Jack was glad she hadn't encountered the policeman, his sarcastic deference full of innuendo: "Does your wife take any drugs, sir? I suppose she doesn't drink at all? She wouldn't be under treatment?" He'd stared about the house in envious contempt, as

if he had more right to be there than Jack - just as the people from the estate would, if they saw something different from their concrete council houses.

The council - They provided such people with the homes they deserved, but not Jack and Emily, oh no. They'd offered compensation for the inconvenience of road-widening. Charity, that was all that was, and he'd told them so. A new house was what he wanted, in an area as quiet as this had used to be when he'd bought the house - and not near any estates full of rowdies, either. That, or nothing.

Emily was standing up. He started from his reverie. "Where are you going?"

"Over to the shop to buy things."

"It's all right, I'll go. What do you want?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll see when I get there."

"No, you stay here." He was becoming desperate; he couldn't tell her why he was insisting. "Make me a list. There's no need for you to go."

"But I want to." The rims of her eyes were trembling with tears.

"All right, all right. I'll help you carry things."

She smiled brightly. "I'll get my other basket," she said, and ran upstairs a few steps before she had to slow.

He felt a terrible dry grief. This nervously vulnerable child had been the woman he'd married. "I'll look after you," he'd used to say. "I'll protect you," for he'd loved to see her turn her innocent trusting smile up to him. For a while, when they'd discovered they could have no children, she had become a woman, almost a stranger - neurotically irritable, jealous of her introversion, unpredictably morose. But when he'd retired, the child had possessed her again. He had been delighted, until her memory had begun to fail. It was almost as though his love for the child in her were wiping out the adult. His responsibility for her was heavier, more demanding now.

That was why they had gone to the seaside while the road was widened: Because the upheaval upset Emily, the glistening mud like ropes of dung where the pavement had been. "Our house will still be here," she'd said. "They won't have knocked that down" - not like the post office up the road. Their months by the sea had cost the last of their savings, and when they'd returned it was too late to accept the council's offer of compensat-

ion, even if he had intended to. But he mustn't blame Emily.

"Here's your basket. Won't you feel silly carrying that? Come on, then, before it gets too hot."

As they reached the gate he took her arm. Sunlight piled on them; he felt as though the clothes he wore were being ironed. Up the road, near where the post office had been, a concrete lamp-standard lay on the new roundabout, protruding rusty twisted roots. A drill yattered, a creaking mechanical shovel hefted and dumped earth. Men stood about, stripped to the waist, dark as foreigners. He pursed his lips in disapproval and ushered Emily to the subway.

The tunnel was scattered with bottles and wrappings, like leavings in a lair. The tiles of the walls were overgrown with a tangle of graffiti: Short white words drooled, red words were raw wounds, ragged-edged. Another of the ceiling lights had been smashed; almost the whole of the tunnel was dim, dimmed further by the blazing daylight beyond. Something came rushing out of the dimness.

He pulled Emily back from the mouth of the tunnel. It must be a cyclist - he'd seen them riding through, with no thought for anyone. From the estate, no doubt, where they knew no better. But nobody emerged from the dimness: Nothing at all.

A wind, then, or something rolling down the steps on the far side. He hurried Emily through the chill darkness; she almost stumbled. He didn't like the subway. It felt cold as a flooded cave, and the glimmering graffiti seemed to waver like submarine plants: He mustn't over-exert himself. The sunlight leapt at him. There was nothing on the steps.

"Oh hello, Mrs Thorpe," the shopwoman said to Emily. "Are you better?" Stupid woman. Jack chattered to her, so that she couldn't disturb his wife. "Have you got everything?" he kept asking Emily. He was anxious to get back to the house, where she would be safe.

They descended the subway steps more slowly, laden now. The passage was thickly dark against the dazzle beyond. "Let's get through quickly," he said. The darkness closed around him, snug and chill; he held Emily's arm more firmly. Cars rumbled overhead. Dark entangled colours shifted. The clatter of their hurry filled the tunnel with sharp fluttering:

That must be what he heard, but it sounded like someone rushing toward them. Someone had almost reached them, brutally overbearing in the dark. For a moment, amid the writhing colours and the red filter of his panting hurry, Jack glimpsed a face. It was brief as lightning: Eyes gleaming with hatred, with threat.

Jack rested in the sunlight, gripping the metal rail. No wonder he had glimpsed the face of the driver from the accident: He had almost panicked then too. And no wonder he'd panicked just now: Suppose roughs had waylaid Emily and himself down there? "I think we'll use the shops on this side in future," he said.

Back in the house he felt ill at ease, somehow threatened. People stared through the windows as if into cages. Were they what Emily liked watching? The sounds of cars seemed too close, aggressively loud.

When the evening began to settle down Jack suggested a walk. They wouldn't use the subway, for the pavements across the road glittered with grit and glass. As he closed the gate carefully behind him a car honked a warning at Emily: Impertinence. He took her arm and led her away from the road, into the suburb.

The sounds of the road fell behind. Trees stood in strips of grass laid along the pavements; still leaves floated at the tips of twigs against a calm green sky. He felt at home now. Cars sat placidly in driveways, cars were gathering outside a few of the semi-detached houses; people sat or stood talking in rooms. Did the people on the estate ever talk to each other, or just watch television all day? he wondered, strolling.

They'd strolled for several streets when he saw the boys. There were four of them, young teenagers - not that one could be sure these days, with them all trying to act older than they should be. They were dressed like pop singers: Sloppily, not a suit among them. As they slouched they tugged at garden hedges, stripping leaves from privet twigs. "Do you live there?" Jack demanded. "Then just you stop that at once."

"It's not your house," said one, a boy with a burst purple lip; he twisted another twig loose.

"Go on. You just move along or you'll get something you won't forget."

"Oooh, what?" the purple-lipped boy cried, pretending effeminacy. They all began to jeer at Jack, dancing around him, dodging out of reach. Emily stood

by the hedge, bewildered. Jack held himself still, waiting for one of them to come close; he could feel blood blazing in his face. "Go on, you young ruffians. If I get hold of you -"

"What'll you do? You're not our father."

"He's too old," one giggled.

Before even Jack knew what was happening Emily leapt at the boy. She'd pulled a pin from her hat; if the boy hadn't flinched back the point would have entered his cheek, or his eye. "Mad old bitch," he shouted, retreating. "My father'll do you," he called as the four ran off. "We know where you live."

Jack felt stretched red, pumped full of blood. "We'd better get home now," he said harshly, not looking at her. The dull giant pins of the lamp-standards stood above the roofs, looming closer. The rough chorus of cars grew louder.

A car snarled raggedly past the gate. As Jack started and glanced back, he glimpsed movement in the subway. A pale rounded shape glimmered in the dark mouth, like the tenant of a burrow: Someone peering out, framed by the muddle of graffiti. Up to no good, Jack though distractedly. Unlocking the front door, he glanced again at the subway; a brief pale movement vanished. He turned back to the door, which had slammed open as something - a stray wind - shouldered past him.

He sat in the front room. Now, until the streetlamps glared, the drawn curtains were their own dark green. He could still feel his urgent startled heartbeats. "You shouldn't have flown at those boys," he said. "That wasn't necessary."

"I was defending you," she said plaintively.

"I had control of the situation. You shouldn't let these people make you lose your dignity."

"Well, you needn't have spoken to them like that. They were only young, they weren't doing much harm. If you make them resentful they only get into worse trouble."

"Are you really so blind? These people don't have any love for us, you know. I wish you could see what they'll do to this house after we're gone. They'll be grown up by then, it'll be their kind who'll spoil what we've made. And they'll enjoy it, you mark my words." He was saying too much, but it was her fault, with her blind indulgence of the young - thank God they'd never had children. "You just watch these people," he said. "You'll

have them taking over the house before we're gone."

"They're only young, it's not their fault." As though this were incontestable proof she said "Like that poor young man who was killed."

He gazed at her speechlessly. Yes, she meant the driver in the crash. She sounded almost as if she were accusing Jack. All he could do was nod: He couldn't risk a retort when he didn't know how much she remembered.

The curtains blackened, soaked with orange light. Emily smiled at him with the generosity of triumph. She parted the curtains and sat gazing out. "I like it now it's bright," she said.

Eventually she went up to bed. He clashed the curtains together and sat pondering sombrely. All this harping on youth - almost as if she wanted to remind him he had been unable to give her children. She should have married one of the men from the estate. To judge from the evidence, they spent half their time stuffing children into their wives.

No, that was unfair. She'd loved and wanted him, she still did. It was Jack she wanted to hold her in bed. He felt ashamed. He'd go to her now. He switched out the light and the orange oozed in.

As he climbed the stairs he heard Emily moaning, in the grip of a dream. The bedroom was full of dim orange twilight, pulsing with passing lights. The bedclothes were so tangled by her writhing it was impossible to decipher her body. "Emily, Emily," he called. Her face rolled on the pillow, turning up to him. A light flashed by. The dim upturned face grinned viciously. It was a man's face.

"You, you -" He grabbed blindly for the light-switch. Emily's face was upturned on the pillow, eyes squeezed into wrinkles against the light, lips. That must be what the flash of light had shown him. "It's nothing, nothing. Go back to sleep," he said sharply. But it was a long time before he was able to join her, and sleep.

HE HAD bought the house when he was sure they could have no children. It had cost their old home and almost the whole of their savings. It was meant to be a present for Emily, a consolation, but she hadn't been delighted: She had thought they should leave their savings to mature with them. But property was an

investment - not that he intended ever to sell the house. They had argued coldly for weeks. He couldn't bear this new logical disillusioned Emily: He wanted to see delight fill her eyes. At last he'd bought the house without telling her.

Unlocking the door, he had held his breath. She'd gazed about, and in her eyes there had been only a sad helpless premonition that he'd done the wrong thing. That had been worse than the day the doctor had told him he was sterile. Yet over the years she'd come to love the house, to care for it almost as if it were a child - until now. Now she did nothing but gaze from the window.

She seemed content. She seldom left the house, except for the occasional evening stroll. He shopped alone. The scribbled subway was empty of menace now. Once, returning from the shop, he saw Emily's face intent behind the shivering pane as a juggernaut thundered by. She looked almost like a prisoner.

The imitation daylight fascinated her most - the orange faces glancing at her, the orange flashes of the cars. Sometimes she fell asleep at the window. He thought she was happy, but wasn't sure; he couldn't get past the orange glint in her eyes.

She was turning her back on their home. Curls of dust gathered in corners, the top of the stove looked charred; she never drew the curtains. Her attitude depressed him. In an indefinable way, it felt as though someone were sneering at the house.

When he tried to take over the housework he felt sneered at: A grown man on his hands and knees with a dustpan - imagine what the men from the estate would say! But he mustn't upset Emily; he didn't know how delicately her mind was balanced now. He swept the floor. His depression stood over him, sneering.

It was as if an intruder were strolling through the house, staring at the flaws, the shabbiness. The intruder stared at Emily, inert before the window; at Jack, who gazed sadly at her as he pretended to read. So much for their companionship. Didn't she enjoy Jack's company any more? He couldn't help not being as lively as he was once. Did she wish he was as lively as the mob outside the window?

He couldn't stand this. He was simply depressing himself with these reveries. He could just make out Emily's face, a

faint orange mask in the pane. "Come up-stairs now," he said gently.

His words hung before him, displaying their absurdity. The sneering surrounded him as he took her arm. It was coarse, stupid, insensitive; it jeered at them for going to bed only to sleep; but he couldn't find words to fend it off. He lay beside Emily, one arm about her frail waist; her dry slim hand rested on his. It distressed him to feel how light her hand was. The orange dimness sank over him, thick as depression, dragging him down toward a dream of sleeping miserably alone.

It was all right. She was beside him. But something dark hung over her. He squinted, trying to strain back the curdled dimness. It was a face; curly black hair framed its vicious sneer. Jack leapt at it, punching. He felt no impact, but the face burst like a balloon full of blood. The blood faded swiftly as a firework's star. He knew at once that he hadn't got rid of the face. It was still in the room.

His fist was thrust deep into the blankets. He awoke panting. He tried to slow his heart with his breathing. The orange light hammered at his eyes. He turned over, to hold Emily, to be sure he hadn't disturbed her. She was not there.

At once he knew she'd wandered out on the road. The sneering surrounded him, still and watchful. He fumbled into his dressing-gown, his feet groped for his slippers. He heard the rapid swish of cars. His head was full of the thud of a body against metal, although he had heard no such sound. He ran downstairs. He felt his mouth gaping like a letter-slot, making a harsh sound of despair.

He stumbled down into the dark. He was rushing uncontrollably; He almost fell. Parallelograms of orange light lay stagnant inside the front door. He scrambled at the lock and bolts, and threw the door open.

The road was bare beneath the saucers of relentless light. Only a blur of dust hung thinly above the surface. Perhaps she was in the subway. His thoughts had fallen behind his headlong search. He had slammed the gate out of his way before he realized she couldn't have bolted the door behind her.

He was awake now, in time. But he was still running, toward the snarl of a car swinging around the curve. He tottered

on the edge of the pavement, then regained his balance. When he turned back to the house he saw Emily gazing between the front-room curtains. The car sped round the curve. Its light blinked in the window beside Emily: A pale bright flash, an oval glimpse of light, a face, a sneering face.

He ran into the room. "Will you get away from there and come to bed!" he shouted. His shock, his treacherous imagination, were rushing his words out of control. "Why don't you bring everyone into the garden if you want to look at them? Bring them into the house?"

She turned and stared at him. For an awful moment he was sure she'd forgotten who he was. "I'm Jack! I'm your husband!" but he couldn't bear to say it, to know. After a while she began to walk slowly, painfully toward the stairs.

BUT perhaps she'd heard what he'd said. The next day several children were playing football on the pavement, using the top of the subway steps as a goal. "Don't play there," she shouted through the open window, "you'll get hurt." They came to the hedge and pointed at her, laughing, making faces. When she didn't chase them they ventured into the garden. Before Jack could intervene she was chasing them wildly, as if she thought the pavement was as wide as it had used to be.

They were returning for another chase when he strode out. "If I see you again I'll get the police to you." He glanced at Emily, and his stomach flooded with raw dismay. Perhaps he was mistaken, but he was sure that as the children had run out of the far end of the subway he'd glimpsed in her eyes a look of longing.

Chasing the children had exhausted them both. She sat at the window; he read. The day was thickly hot and stagnant, nothing moved except the cars. He felt as though he were trapped in someone's gaze.

"These children these days," she said. "It isn't their fault, it's the way they're brought up. Do you know, some parents don't want their children at all?"

What was she trying to say? What was she sidling towards? He nodded, gazing at the book.

"Did you see that little girl before, that we were chasing? She had such a pretty face. It's such a pity."

Surely she wasn't heading where he

suspected, surely she knew better. The heat held him limp and still.

"Don't you think it's up to people like us to help these children? The longing was clear now in her eyes. "The unwanted ones, I mean. We could give them love. Some of them have never had any."

"Love won't feed them," he told the book.

"But we could go without. We always buy the best meat, you know. I've still a little money that I've saved from housekeeping."

He hadn't known that. Why didn't she invest it? But he felt too exhausted even to change the subject with that argument - exhausted, and depressed: She wasn't musing any longer, she was serious. "And we don't really need such a large house," she said.

Before he could recover from this betrayal she said "Don't you think it would be nice to bring up a little girl?"

She had never mentioned adoption before. Nor had he; the idea of a strange child in his house had always seemed disturbing, threatening. Now there was a stronger reason why they couldn't adopt a child: They were too old. "We wouldn't be able to," he said.

"Why not?"

Because we're too old! But when he met her bright trusting childlike gaze, he couldn't tell her. "Too much work. Too exhausting," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that. I could do it." Every objection he made she demolished. She had more experience of life than most parents, she'd been brought up decently herself, she would love the child more than its own parents could, it would have a good home, they'd keep the child away from bad company. All day she persisted, through dinner, into the evening. Her eyes were moist and bright.

The orange light sank into the room, stifling. Emily's words closed him in. He was trapped, shaking his head at each point she made; he knew he looked absurd. He mustn't remind her they were old, near death. Why must she persist? Couldn't she see there was something he was trying not to say? As he stared at the book the orange light throbbed on his eyes like blood. "We could sell the house, that would leave us some money," she said. "Wouldn't you like a little girl?"

"No," he blurted at the book. "No."

"Oh, why not?"

His answer was too quick for him. "Be-

cause the authorities wouldn't let us have one," he shouted, "you stupid old woman!"

Her face didn't change. She turned away and sat forward, toward the window. Her shoulders flinched as though a lash had cut them. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry," he said, but she only sat closer to the pane.

He must go to her, hold her - except that when he made to stand up he felt intolerably fatuous. Every nuance of his apology echoed in his head; it sounded like a bad actor's worst line, he felt as if he were at the mercy of an audience's contempt. The sense of his own absurdity, more relentless than the heat or the orange light, pushed him back into his chair.

Emily leaned closer to the window. Suddenly he knew she was trying to see her face in the glass. She went to the hall mirror. He saw her see herself, her age, perhaps for the first time. Her face seemed to slump inward. She walked past him without a glance and sat before the window.

"Look here, I'm sorry." He was whining, each word made him feel more contemptible. Perhaps it was her contempt for him that he was feeling. It gathered darkly on him, atrociously depressing.

He couldn't comfort her while he felt like this. In fact, if it were his own depression, it might be affecting her too. He must go upstairs, hoping she would heal by herself. Even to stand up was a struggle. She sat still as he left the room, glancing back miserably at her.

Upstairs he felt a little better. At least he could close his eyes and clear his mind. He lay limply in the heat; orange painted the dark within his eyelids. Emily would get over it. She would have had to realize eventually. He couldn't think for her all the time, he shouted defensively. He couldn't protect her all her life. The orange glow didn't contradict him. It was soothing, empty, calm.

No, not entirely empty. Something was rushing toward him from deep in the emptiness. As it came it breathed depression at him, thick as fumes. It was rushing faster, it was on him. A face was pressed into his, bright with hatred. Before he had time to flinch back, there was nothing - but something was rushing toward him again, it thrust into his face for a moment, grinning. Again. The face. The face. The face.

He woke. His hands were clenched on the sheets. The face was gone, but for a moment, though depression muffled his thoughts, he knew why it had been there. The man had been killed without warning; he meant Jack to feel the sudden ruthless terror of death. And Jack did. He lay inert and appalled.

All of a sudden, for no reason, his depression lifted - as if someone standing over him had moved away. His mind brightened. He scoffed at his dream. What nonsense, he had killed nobody. It took him a while to wonder what Emily was doing.

He needn't run. She would only be sitting at the window. But he fought away the soothing of the orange calm and hurried to the stairs. Emily was in the hall, at the front door. Her hand was on the lock.

"Where are you going?" She glanced up at the sound of his voice. As she saw him her eyes filled with a mixture of disgust and fear. She pulled the door open; orange light spilled over her.

"Emily, wait!" She was on the path. He ran downstairs, almost falling. He was halfway down when the depression engulfed him like sluggish muddy water. At once he knew that it was surrounding Emily, blinding her to him. It had reached its intended victim.

She was running, a small helpless figure beneath the orange glare. The light spoiled her blue dress, staining it patchily black. She was moving headlong, as fast as the threat in his dream. She snatched the gate out of her way. Amid the nocturnal chorus of the city, a car was approaching.

"Stay there, Emily!" Perhaps she heard him; something made her run faster. The

light throbbed, his eyes blurred. For a moment he saw something perched on her shoulder, a dark thing as big as her head, trembling and vague as heat. When he blinked his eyes clear it had gone, but he was sure it was still beside her. He was sure he knew its face.

She was on the roadway now, still running - not toward the far pavement, but toward the speeding car. Jack was running too, although he knew he couldn't save her. She was determined to be killed. Even if he caught her, their struggle would take them under the car.

But she mustn't die alone, with the whisper of hatred and depression at her ear. That death would be like his dream, but prolonged endlessly. She must see that he was with her. He ran; the road and the lamp-standards swayed; the orange light pounded, and his breath clawed at his lungs. He had no chance of overtaking her. She wouldn't see him.

Suddenly she slipped and fell. Jack ran faster, panting harshly; he felt the pavement change to roadway underfoot. Perhaps he could drag her out of the way - no, he could hear how fast the car was approaching. He ran to her and cradled her in his arms. She seemed stunned by the pain of her fall, but when her eyes opened he thought she saw him and smiled weakly. He managed to smile too, although he could feel a darkness rushing toward them. Suddenly he wondered: Since her tormentor had stayed here, would they be tied here too? Was this only the beginning of their struggle?

He pressed her face into his chest to hide from her what was upon them: The car, and the grinning face inflated with blood.

A regular contributor to our pages, Ramsey Campbell's excellent brood of horror novels continues to grow, and in more ways than one. His *restored* text of *The Face that Must Die* was published in a superb edition by Scream/Press in 1983, and now we are to expect revised versions of *The Nameless* and *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* from Tor and Granada respectively. Granada also has the American text of *The Parasite (To Wake the Dead)*, due in November. His most recently published novel is *Obsession* from Macmillan (out this summer from Granada). Scream/Press has also published *Cold Print*, a collection of nearly all the author's Lovecraftian tales. Short stories are upcoming in Alan Ryan's *Halloween Horrors* and Dennis Etchison's *Midnight '90 and Masters of Darkness*. A little collectable rarity is bound to be *Watch the Birdie*, a 100-copy chapbook already out of print from Rosemary Pardoe's Haunted Library. Ramsey also contributes a regular column to *Fantasy Review*, and a lot of essays on films are due in the forthcoming Penguin Books' encyclopedia of horror and the supernatural. Currently in progress is a new novel: *The Hungry Moon*.

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"Take care, boy," she hissed."

The Pushover

By ARDATH MAYHAR

Illustration by MARK DUNN

IT LOOKED like a piece of cake. Mel and I had knocked over six little country banks without a hitch, though, of course, the FBI had makes on us and our pictures were out all over the map. Hell, this little old bank had them posted... I saw them when I cased it a couple of days before the job. Nobody gave me more of a second glance than a stranger in a back-country town gets anyway.

We had it down pat, with a car stashed in the woods a couple of miles from a three-way crossroad, the timing worked out to a second, everything smooth as oil. When we busted into the side door of the

bank and all the people froze with surprise and fear, we worked it right to schedule. In three minutes, we were in number one car and moving, with well over fifty thousand dollars in the bags at our feet.

That was when things came unglued. Somebody must have slid out the front door when we came in the side, for an old codger behind a beat-up pickup let loose on us with a double-barrelled shotgun. It didn't stop the car or hurt either of us, but it made hash of the windshield, and that slowed us down getting to the second car.

The police band scanner in the car

saved our bacon. We had thought we'd have plenty of time to get clear before the nearest law could get thirty miles out into the country and get descriptions of us. Just bad luck made a deputy be cruising the highway three miles away. He'd have had us, without that scanner. As it was, we had to ditch number two car and take to the woods in a hurry.

Those are big damn woods down there. Undergrowth is so thick you can hardly plow through, some places. But there's lots of creeks and quite a bit of swampy land, so we felt as if we could throw off the bloodhounds that were sure to be put on our trail. Both of us are country boys and know woods like the palms of our hands. Besides, we stopped in the middle of an overgrown field and scrubbed ourselves down, shoe-soles and all, with goatweeds. That ought to change the scent of anything that walks.

We had all sorts of packed-up supplies in number two, so we had with us enough food for a good while, with blankets, all rolled into easily-carried bundles. But what with sawvines and huckleberry thickets, we were glad to find a spot that we figured would do us until the heat died down. It was a low ridge rising out of a sandy flat that was awash with springs and covered with trees that had never been discovered by the sawmill men. Some of them must have been a hundred feet tall. There was plenty of cover from the small plane that began coming over, now and again. We figured it was watching the dirt roads all around.

The first night we didn't even keep watch. We knew what we were doing, but they didn't, and it would take a while to get bloodhounds up from Huntsville and put them on our trail. Which, we felt sure, they wouldn't be able to follow, anyway.

The middle of the second day, we could hear the hounds trailing, way off in the distance. They weren't coming our way, and we didn't worry. We had a laugh at the moonshiners that were likely to be caught with the goods, with the place all full of deputies and the FBI. Our transister radio said that they had every policeman, reserve deputy, and dogcatcher in fifty miles down there in the woods looking for us. It would have been a sweet time to hit one of the bigger towns, but nobody seems to have thought of it. Anyway, we sat back and let them boil.

For the better part of a week we let

things ride. According to the radio, the hunt had moved off to the north, where some poor pair of suckers had looked something like us. But we knew how to wait things out, which is why we've done so many jobs without being caught. Then it began to rain.

Woods in fine October weather are mighty nice to live in. In chilly, wet October weather they're instant pneumonia. We needed a place to spend the next week without freezing our tails off.

All around us were big woods, never cut as far as we could see. We figured it must be some big family holding that was tied up in the courts, or some timber company would have cleaned it out. Sure enough, after looking around for a while, we found a crooked dirt track that led through thick timber to a big old tumble-down grey house.

Part of the house was empty - no windows were in the frames, the doors were black holes in the scaly walls. But the low half, behind the curving porch, was pretty tight, and smoke was coming out of the stovepipe. We scrootched under a magnolia that covered as much ground as the house did and watched for half a day.

Twice a tiny little old woman came out, once to go to the well for water, once for a trip down the bushy path to the privy. When she came back from there, she went by the woodpile and took an armload back in with her. It was getting on for dark, and we thought if she had anybody else in there, they'd have gotten the wood for her. So we went in.

She looked up when we walked in. The door hadn't been locked, though she had a portable radio going on the kitchen table, and she must've known we were or had been around close. But she didn't turn a hair. She ought to have been scared stiff, for she wasn't much taller than a ten-year-old and wouldn't have weighed eighty pounds soaking wet. Her hair was white, and she wore it screwed up in a tight knot that pulled her eyes into a slant so you could hardly tell what colour they were. But they were black and bright and had a wicked light in them. I could tell when she looked up at me.

Like I say, she should have been scared. I'm six-two, and Mel is a lot bigger. We could have pinched her between our fingers, and she'd have gone out like a candle. But she just looked up at us with those slanty black eyes and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. I wondered if you weren't playing

possum out in my timber stand. Come and have a cup of tea."

"Coffee," Mel grunted. "Make it strong."

"Don't buy the stuff," she said, lifting the kettle off the stove-eye. "Costs too much and gaums up your innards. Mint tea or comfrey tea you can have... unless you want to go in to town after coffee."

Mel stood over her and reached down. He took her by the scruff of her neck and lifted her like a cat does a kitten. He spat on the floor, then he growled at her, "Listen here, old woman, you'll do what we say, and you won't talk back. You live out here all by yourself and think maybe you count for something. You don't. We run things, when we're around, and no dried-up skirt gives us any lip. Get that, and get it good."

She looked up at him, eyes sparkling black fire, and a tight little smile twitched at her lip. Somehow, the look of that smile gave me the shivers, but I didn't mention it to Mel. He'd have hoored me about it. He didn't think any woman who ever lived was worth the trouble of strangling.

He thumped her down on her feet again, and she stood, hands on hips, looking at him. Up and down she surveyed him, then me, then she said, "I'm a loner and a maverick. I thought maybe you two might be a couple more. But I was wrong. Low-life, ignorant thieves, that's all. Well, you might have had my help, but now you won't. And when Lena isn't for you, she's against you."

Mel laughed his booming laugh that didn't sound cheerful at all. Then he said, "Fix supper, woman, and shut up."

She smiled again, that tight little twitch of her lip, and moved to the cook-stove to add wood. When the skillet was sizzling with bacon, Mel and I stretched out in the two fair-sized chairs in the room. The rain was chattering away on the tin roof, and it felt mighty good to be inside and warm. When she put mugs of steamy liquid in our hands, we drank the contents, even if they did smell and taste of strong mint.

After a while, she slapped a couple of heavy plates onto the pine table and said, "Come eat. Much good may it do you." Then she started for the door at the side of the room. Mel stood up and went after her, raising his right hand to swat her across the face.

She never paused, but her right hand

moved, the fingers making a funny weaving motion. Mel's had stuck in the air, about six inches short of the spot where she had been.

"Take care, boy," she hissed. "I've been right patient with you. You raise your hand to me again, and you'll wish the FBI had you in some nice, safe prison. I'm going to my room to read, and you'll do well to dig out your manners and dust them off. Lena McCarver may not look it now, but I was reared a lady of good family, used to civility." She went through the door, leaving it open a crack.

Mel stood looking at his hand. For a half-minute it stayed stuck in mid-air, then he was able to sort of reel it in. He wiggled his fingers with a frown on his face. "Feels numb-like," he said. "Halfway between how a foot that's been asleep feels when it comes back to life and the way it feels when you get your finger on a bare wire. What the hell did that old broad do to me?"

I pulled back a chair and sat down to pile my plate with eggs and bacon and hot biscuits. "Leave her alone, Mel," I choked, between bites. "That old biddy gives me a funny feeling. She's got more on the ball, somehow, than you'd think. I feel it in my bones. Might be, we'd have done better out in the woods."

He snorted, but he sat down to eat with a thoughtful look on his ugly mug. When we were full as ticks, we opened out our bedrolls on the floor. Early as it was, we were hardly able to keep our eyes open, what with the full meal and the warm room. Before I lay down, I looked through the crack in Lena's door.

She was sitting at a little table with a coal-oil lamp in the middle. Her nose was almost touching the pages of a big, thick book, as she read, her lips moving as she moved her left index finger down the lines. Her right hand was held over the table, and she was making some sort of patterns, holding her fingers just so, crooking and wiggling them just so, until the shadow it threw against the far wall was enough to make your skin squinch up into goose-pimples.

"What's she doing?" Mel asked, as I crept away from the door to my blankets.

"Just reading," I mumbled. But I never saw anybody read in just that way, ever before in my life. As I drifted to sleep, the crack of light from her door seemed to grow wider and longer until it swallowed up the world...but by then, I was asleep.

The next morning was still grey and damp, and Mel was mean as a mangy hound. But I noticed he didn't snap at the old lady near as bad as he had before. Now and again he'd open his mouth with a snarly look at its corners, but she'd slant those eyes at him, and he'd just poke in more breakfast or a cigarette. Still, I could tell she was getting to him. His eyes were getting narrower and narrower and turning that dishwater grey that meant he was going to do something that might be dumb but that would surely be nasty.

About the time we were finishing eating, there came a scratch at the door, and Lena let in a piebald tomcat with ears so mauled in old fights that he barely had any at all. She put a pan of scraps on the floor behind the stove for him, and he disappeared into the corner and started giving them a fit, growling at any foot that came too near. Mel glanced over that way, then away, and I crossed my fingers. I found out the hard way about bothering old ladies' cats. None of my preacher Pa's sermons ever taught me a thing, but old Mrs. Harrison's whaling with a stick of stove-wood gave me a lot of respect for old ladies and cats.

I nudged Mel and whispered, "Let it be, Mel. It's not going to help out a bit, messing with that cat."

He just glared at me and went to the door to look out into the dismal day. By that time, the old dame was done with her dishes and had refilled the kettle and tidied up the kitchen. She looked around, nodded, then went off into the unfinished part of the house.

Mel grinned a wicked grin and eased over toward the stove. He nearly jumped out of his skin when her sharp voice said at his elbow, "Round ten o'clock, Boze Blair will be coming out with my month's groceries. I hire him to bring me what I need, regular. If you two don't want to be seen, I'd suggest you hide in the smokehouse or the privy. If you kill Boze, his wife will have somebody out combing the woods for him, and here's where they'll look first. It's nine-ten now, so you'd better be thinking where to go."

I said, "It's mighty nasty out. Why don't we hide in the other part of the house? At least, it's got a roof."

She gave a little whinnying laugh. "Now that's a plumb good idea," she gasped. "You go right ahead and hide there. Just watch the clock, and about five to ten,

you go right in that door there."

I really didn't like her laugh, but I couldn't let on in front of Mel. We opened the door, and Mel sort of fooled the cat into going through. When the time came, we went in, too, to find the critter sitting on a dusty mantel, looking down at us. We weren't a bit too soon, because we heard a truck coming up the drive just after.

Mel hissed through the door, "Remember, you wave him in here so we can hear every word. If anything makes him suspicious, we'll blow you both to Kingdom Come. Don't forget it!"

She didn't answer, but we could see through the cracks that she was doing what he said. A scraggy old codger mooched up the steps with a big grocery box and shoved the door open with his toe. We could see glimpses of him, around the door, as he set it on the table and reached for the cup of tea she handed him.

"Lots on the radio about the robbery up to Hampden," she said. "Were you there?"

"Nope," he grunted. "I come along about ten minutes too late for it. They hid out for a while, them fellers thinks, out in this direction. Minty worried some about their coming in on you, but I told her that even a bank robber wasn't going to risk the McCarver place, not to mention tackling you!" He cackled a high-pitched laugh. "Now they don't have a Chinaman's notion where them crooks is. Blocked all the roads for four days, when they knowed full well them guys was afoot! Fool town folks."

Though he drank the tea and was very polite, I felt that Boze was happy to go down the steps to his truck, after Lena had paid him with crumpled bills from a leather wallet that was green with mildew. I turned to tell Mel that it was safe to go back in the kitchen...but he was busy.

Somehow, he had caught that tomcat and had his big hand around its neck, squeezing bit by bit. The cat's pink tongue was out between its teeth, and it was struggling mightily to free its hind feet from Mel's other hand, twisting and bucking in his fist like a fresh-caught trout.

Mel's eyes were bright and happy, and he was enjoying the critter's desperation as much as he ever enjoyed anything. I was opening my mouth to call him back to his senses when a cracked cup that had been sitting on one of the windowsills just upped and came sailing across the room and shattered against Mel's jawbone. As

he stood, surprised, a glob of something black and sticky-looking oozed out of the fireplace and plopped across his wrist - the one holding the cat's hind feet.

Mel gave a yell, and his hand seemed to drop, limp, as the cat gave a heave and set to tearing Mel up with his claws. All at once, Mel had a handful of mad razorblades, and I could see little drops of his blood flying through the air every time the cat made a swipe at him. He tried to drop the cat, but now the cat had him, and it wasn't letting go. It climbed him as if he were a tree, leaving blood all the way; then it skittered across the mantel and made an impossible leap to the open window and out.

I went over and tried to mop Mel up with the bandana I had worn over my face in the robbery. Then I heard a giggle and turned. There stood Lena in the door, bent over she was laughing so hard. Mel started toward her with murder in his eye, but she raised her hand and made a funny sign with her fingers. It was like being caught in plastic...or like being a fly frozen into an ice cube that wasn't cold.

I tried my damndest to move, even if it was just to fall flat, but it was as if the air had congealed around me. My eyeballs could swivel, my lids close, but that was all of me that would move. Mel, directly in my line of vision, was in the same condition. My heart seemed to have slowed down to a leisurely ta-thump, ta-thump, and I was breathing so slowly it wasn't even noticeable.

The old woman stopped laughing and stood straight, close to Mel. If she'd been a couple of feet taller, she'd have been eyeball-to-eyeball with him, but as it was the top of her head came about to his second coat button. She smiled that tight smile, and her slanty eyes were bright in the gloom of the cobwebby room.

"It's been a long time since I did a really big sticky-spell," she said. "Had to study up. But it's working fine, now isn't it?"

She walked around us, and I could feel the sharpness of her eyes like thumbtacks in my back. I could hear her rummaging around in the room behind us, and cold sweat began to ooze down my back and neck. She had us cold, and there was no way of knowing what in tunket she intended to do.

Finally she came back into sight. She was carrying two big rag dolls with yarn hair and shoe-button eyes. They seemed to be clean and well-kept, but their calico

dresses were faded so much I knew they must be mighty old. She set the dolls on the mantel where the cat had been, propped against the mirror over it so they would sit up. Then she wiggled her fingers again, and I found my feet moving just enough so I was standing fully facing the fireplace.

She moved away...into the kitchen, it sounded like, and was gone for a few seconds. Then she was back, right in front of me. She carried a footstool in one hand and a little bowl in the other. She plunked the stool down and stepped up on it, so her face was just below mine. Then she dipped her finger into the bowl, and I could see something blue on its tip, as she reached up for my forehead. I could feel the tickle as she drew a circle on my skin and several shapes or patterns inside it.

Then she got down and moved the stool, and I knew the same thing was being done to Mel. When she had finished, I could hear her potting around putting everything away. Meanwhile, I felt as if all my insides had turned to water. I don't think I could have stood, even if she had turned me loose. Waiting for her to make her move was worse than anything she could have done...I thought.

After a bit, I heard her come back into the ruined room. She didn't come where I could see her, but I heard her muttering and sort of singing, back there by the window. It got cold, all of a sudden, as if a blue norther had hit full force. My hands and feet went completely numb, then my body began to go numb, too. Even the insulated hunting jacket I wore seemed to do no good at all.

Things went sort of dim, as if my eyes weren't working right, and the grey light in the room wavered, as if thicker clouds were going over fast. My eyes felt funnier and funnier, and then they stopped seeing at all. In the blackness, I felt as if I were moving very fast down a tunnel. But in a little the light began to come back again.

I could see the window...but from an odd angle. I could see the old woman standing there by the empty casement. I could see Mel, frozen like a statue. I could see ME! For a minute I couldn't tell what had happened. I sat there, stunned; then I tried to move my eyelids. But from the way I felt, I didn't have eyelids any more. I slanted my gaze down as far as I could without an eyeball that moved. Two rag doll legs stuck out in

front of me, with black cloth shoes on blobby feet.

Lena looked up at the mantel where I sat and grinned, a real, wide, wicked grin. Then she reached up and took me down and tucked me under one arm. As I moved, I could see that she had Mel under the other arm. She took us into the kitchen and put us where we could see the cookstove and partway down the road, from the small window. We seemed to be on a high shelf, and I felt the bulk of something that seemed to be a book digging into my side. THAT book, I thought, with a shudder.

"I don't want to be too mean to you boys," Lena cackled. "Don't want you to be too bored and unhappy. This way, you can see what goes on - what there is of it - and maybe you'll do some thinking. I'm going to get enough work out of you to pay for all my trouble."

I could hear her tiny feet pattering back through the door, then returning... followed by the clunk, clunk of heavy feet in thick boots. They moved across the kitchen and out onto the porch, tap-tap-tap; CLUNK, CLUNK, CLUNK, CLUNK!

Through the window, I watched them move down the road toward the woods. I carried a crosscut saw over my shoulder, and Mel had two axes in one hand and wedges in the other. A bottle of oil stuck out of his hip pocket.

She went in front. One hand was in the air above her shoulder, beating time. Our feet, following obediently, kept to her beat.

We sit on the shelf, Mel and I. Sometimes she moves us around. Sometimes she plays with us as if she were still ten years old.

Mostly we sit. And think.

Ardath Mayhar is a prolific authoress from Texas with such recently-published novels as *How the Gods Move* in *Kyrannon* (Doubleday), *Soul-Singer of Tymos* (Atheneum), *Golden Dream: A Fuzzy Odyssey* (Ace), plus a number of others, in both hardcover and paperback. Due are *Medicine Walk* (Atheneum) and *Carrots and Miggles* from the same publisher. Her shorter work has turned up in such publications as *Swords Against Darkness*, *Mummy!*, *Amazons II*, *Twilight Zone*, *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, *Weirdbook*, *Kadath*, *Space & Time*, *Gothic*, *Fantasy Book*, *Eldritch Tales*, *Owlflight*, *Mike Shayne's* and numerous others. A similarly extensive list of publications could be quoted for her poetry. *The Pushover* is Ardath's first story in *Fantasy Tales*.

Yuggoth

By DAVID COWPERTHWAIT

MOONLESS and terrible, dark as nightmare,
Yuggoth lurks upon the utmost brink;
And sleepers chancing upon it shrink,
From the towers - windowless - rising there.
Doorways gaping reveal the Outer Dark,
In chambers never by man seen;
Never litten by a lantern's beam;
Never touched by Time's ruinous mark.

Bridges black span canals of pitch,
Bubbling and lethargic in abysmal flumes;
Endless and aimless; lifeless as tombs.
Wind screams like an ireful witch,
Around Yuggoth's ebon peaks frozen -
Outer Yuggoth, Primal Night's chosen.





"I was trained in all the noble arts of war."

The Castle at World's End

By CHRIS NAYLOR

Illustration by STEPHEN E. FABIAN

AT THE edge of the world, they say, there is neither endless sea nor bottomless cliff, nor yet an infinity of wasteland under a limbo twilight, such as some have described, but only a green hill, smooth as glass, that rises a little above the lands of men as if to shield from their eyes the beyond which it is not their business to know, and then slopes steeply down, further than the eye can see, to a dubious and unknown end, or to no end at all. And on the summit of this hill stands a castle, which is called the Castle at World's End.

Now to this castle, with its four slender, many-windowed towers and its little cobbled courtyard, there came riding one evening a knight on horseback, in full armour, bearing a lance and shield, and wearing the arms of the Duchy of Sarseny. He was graciously received, though he seemed a surly man, who spoke little and scowled much; and after he had eaten, and sat supping wine in the guest hall and staring moodily into the fire, the Lord of that castle came down from his chamber and took a seat on the opposite side of the hearth, and looked searchingly at his visitor for a while, and then began to engage him in conversation: Asking him what sort of man he was, and what was his adventure, riding out of peaceful lands with sword and shield, on a road that led nowhere. And at this the knight stirred as if troubled by an old wound, and seemed to throw off his taciturnity as a man throws off a heavy cloak; and he launched into a long reply, which ran thus:

"Sir (he said), you hit exactly upon the source of my restlessness, and the reason of my coming here, when you remark that I ride in warlike fashion 'out of peaceful lands.' I am, as you may easily see, a man of Sarseny; and when I was a boy, from my earliest years until my

coming of age at sixteen, never a month passed but our Duchy had some skirmish with one of her neighbours: Whether it was Irlaunt to the south, or the Burg of Muncanton to the north, or the Guild Towns in their prosperous valleys to the east; while to the west, as you may know (for you have the look of a man of learning, as it seems to me), for a long time the Horse-Thief Tribes kept unruly independence, until we quelled them finally in the battle of Weasenburg, at which I was one of the youngest of the free knights. At that time, you see, Sarseny was a nation of warriors; and I was trained in all the noble arts of war, and thought of nothing else but to be a leader of men on the battlefield when I attained my maturity.

"Well, it was not to be. After the Horse-Thieves were defeated, it seemed that no-one wished to cross swords with Sarseny; And treaties were concluded with the Guild, and with the Three Princes Regnant of Irlaunt, and with Muncanton, so that there was nothing for a fighting man to do but go home and hang up his shield, and take to trade or some other foolery. But I had no mind for that, though others urged me to it. So I left my estate in the hands of my servants, and put on armour, took my best horse, and set out to find battle in the world beyond the borders of Sarseny."

Here the knight fell silent awhile; and his host, noting the dark look in his eyes, thought to speak a cheering word, but refrained out of courtesy; and after a moment the knight lifted his head and resumed the story.

"I wandered (he continued) all the lands of the world; I journeyed to snow-bound Zemoye in the far north, and spoke with the Fur-wearers with their wizened yellow faces and slanting eyes; I roamed as far as Efra in the south, where the

sun is named God's Cauldron, and the people run naked with skins scalded the colour of charcoal. I saw old women haggling in market-places, children tumbling about the streets in mock-fights, men brawling in taverns; but nowhere did I find one nation, one city, one town, at war with another: And where there was no war, there was no employment for such as I.

"Then, one day, as I sat in a tavern in a small village a thousand miles from my homeland, I heard an old man speak of the Lands Beyond World's End. I questioned him eagerly concerning these lands, but he would only say that he had heard tell of them from his grandfather, who was long dead, and knew naught of them save a few idle tales, such as might issue from the fanciful brain of any yarn-spinning poet in his cups; in short, the old man himself dismissed the tale of such lands as pure imagining. And since none else in that place could say they had heard even the name of these lands, I put the matter out of my mind, for 'twas only a fretfulness of an idle brain that had roused my interest in them in the first place.

"But then it happened that, several weeks later, in another tavern some hundreds of miles from the first, I heard another speak of the Lands Beyond World's End. And then the thought came to me that perhaps in those lands there might be wars, and employment for a man of battle; so again I questioned the teller, and was no better rewarded. All dismissed the places as being some Green-Ginger-land, a fable or fiction merely.

"But one said to me, after my spirits had sunk lower than the sun at midnight, that there was indeed a place men spoke of as World's End, and that he had heard of a castle that stood there, where a Lord dwelt that had the reputation of being a wise man. So I determined to seek out the castle, and ask if there was any truth in the rumour of Lands Beyond World's End. And there, good sir, you have my tale; and I thank you for your hospitality, and for your patience in listening to the rambling words of an ill sort of raconteur, and I ask you as a boon to tell me aught you can concerning these lands of which I have heard on my travels."

His host smiled, and stroked his white beard a little perplexedly. "Certes, my friend," quoth he, "this is the Castle at World's End, and I am its keeper; but I

know ill how I can help you in this matter, for I also have heard nothing of the Lands Beyond World's End save the name only. Often I have stood upon the grass of the hill on which this castle stands and gazed down its unfathomed slope, and conjectured what might lie at the bottom of it, where all is blue haze and a wavering of the air; but I have never adventured to find out, nor do I know of any that have done so. However, there is in the highest tower of this castle a great library of rare books, wherein much is writ concerning the lands of this world, both of countries that presently thrive and of those that have sunk under sea or are now desert and waste; and mayhap in those volumes there is some word of the Lands Beyond World's End."

At this the knight frowned, and said, "How then - do you not know what is in your own library?"

The old man smiled gently. "Friend, it would take more lifetimes than I have years to read every book that is in that library, for it occupies twenty rooms, each as great in extent as this hall, and in each room the shelves close-packed with tomes rise from floor to ceiling on every wall. And this is but a fragment, a tiny residue, of the vast library of Araxos, that city whose ruins now lie deserted on the quiet shore of the Aethian Sea. The rest of that library is lost - destroyed, some say, in the fire that ravaged Araxos and brought her splendour to an end."

As this speech progressed the knight began to be irritable, biting his nails and seeming impatient to speak. At length he burst out, "This talk of books only fills me with an angry desire to cast off thought and speech for action. I was never a bookish man, and the notion of twenty rooms filled with the paper ghosts of dead men oppresses me with horror. I fear books; for I have heard it said, and I think it true, that a man who spends long enough in their company grows at last unmindful of the world outside their covers, and lives finally in a twilight world of fantastic things and places as insubstantial as dreams."

"That may be," returned his host, even so you are welcome to seek in my books the truth concerning those lands you asked me of."

"I thank you," the knight replied swiftly, "but I would rather trust my own eyes and ears, and venture myself and

my horse down yonder slope, to find a speedier and surer answer to my questions."

"If the hill has an end," said the other.

"Failing that I can always turn back," answered the knight.

The old Lord pursed his lips, but said nothing; and seeing the conversation was at an end, the knight rose from his chair and, thanking his host, bade him good-night, and retired to the chamber which had been prepared for him.

SO IT befell that early next morning the knight, provisioned for several days' riding from his host's pantries, mounted his horse and rode out of the castle courtyard and down the smooth green slope of the last of the hills. And from a high window in the castle library the old white-haired Lord watched him, until the time came when the glint of his armour was only one of a million golden motes dancing in the warm air; and then he turned from the window, and taking up from a table a heavy tome writ in faded uncials and bound in a chimaera's hide, he began to read.

So our traveller left the Castle at World's End; and throughout the first day the riding was easy, and the weather fair, and the blue haze towards which he descended shimmered luxuriously; and the knight's surly mood soon lifted, and he sat lightly in the saddle, and after a while began to sing.

Thus he rode all day, and the blueness before and below him and the greenness of the slope, and withal the smooth angle of the descent, changed not a whit. And when the sun set he dismounted and let his horse gaze freely, while he himself pitched his small pavilion; and while he was doing this night fell suddenly and the stars came out. There was no moon; but looking up to the zenith, the knight saw one yellow star that seemed brighter and larger than the rest, which seemed like to be a lamp burning in some high window of the Castle at World's End, by which an old man read among ancient books.

Thus the knight rode for four days; and during all that time the hill, and the blue haze at its bottom, changed not at all; and at night a yellow star glimmered still near the zenith, but ever more faint and distant.

On the fifth day he rode until noon, and his spirits sank lower by the hour; and in the afternoon he rode not at all,

but sat disconsolate on the green turf and let his horse graze while he debated with himself whether to turn back; yet by the time night fell he had not decided, and in the darkness he sat and brooded still, while the stars came out and gathered round to watch him with remote, incurious eyes.

So sunk in his own thoughts was he that for some time he did not notice a strange phenomenon; and when, looking about him distractedly, his gaze chanced at length to fall in the right quarter, he could at first make nothing of what he saw. It seemed that he saw stars where on previous nights there had been none; and all gathered in one place, strangely low in the sky, in a bright cluster at the conjectured foot of the long steep hill. Warm and yellow were these stars, and grouped seemingly at less than random, for many formed small constellations here and there of a roughly cross-shaped or otherwise linear form.

The knight puzzled over these stars awhile; and then it came to him suddenly that they were not stars at all, but the lights of many lamps shining in house-windows, and that the dark surface over which they lay scattered was not the night sky, but a great plain that opened out some hundreds of feet below him. And as for the cross-shapes and linear forms, what were they but the lines of village streets, along which the houses lay?

At this realisation the knight's hope leapt up anew like the waters of a fountain, and he would have mounted up there and then and ridden off down the slope; but the consideration that his horse might stumble in the dark withheld him: And so he turned in, but in truth did not sleep well, his mind being alive with anticipation and excitement.

Dawn found him already in the saddle and proceeding at a gentle pace down the green slope, whose higher reaches now stretched up behind him beyond sight, a veritable mountain. Below, the plain he had guessed at in the darkness was veiled from sight by the shimmering of the air; but as he rode on he seemed to see here and there among the blue, tricks and flashes of green and brown, that grew steadily more solid and definite. And by late afternoon the thing could no longer be doubted, for there it lay, spread out before him like a many-hued carpet, all dotted with farms and villages and towns: The plain of the Lands Beyond

World's End.

With joyful haste now did the knight spur his steed on, and soon he was riding not upon the smooth turf of the long slope but across wild, heathery country, and before him rose the low curving shapes of downland and pastured hills. And shortly he was passing among grazing flocks of sheep, and rustic figures seated upon the ground with crooks resting across their knees watched him ride by; and in the end he came to a village. Whereupon, dismounting, he went to the door of a cottage and knocked, and was answered by the goodwife, who offered him food and a bed for the night. And so another day ended, but this time the knight fell asleep contentedly; and when morning came he was about early, whistling softly to himself and assiduously polishing his armour.

He was well fed there, and started on the road before the sun was halfway to noon; but in answer to his eager questions the goodwife and her husband could only say that they knew of no wars or battles in the neighbourhood, though indeed there might be such things further afield among more barbarous folk.

This answer did not much please the knight, but he was not yet over his delight at discovering these new and marvellous lands, and so was not greatly disillusioned.

As the day went by, however, and villages came into view before him and dropped away behind, and the sun first rose and then began to decline, the knight grew a little tired of the shaking heads in answer to his questioning: And it came to his mind that seldom had he seen so peaceful and contented a land, occupied by a people seeming without fear or upset or invasion, or indeed of anything worse than a spot of ill weather. And so the knight grew sorely discontented, and three days went by in this fashion, and each morning he polished his armour with a little less zeal.

Then, coming to a town on a busy cross-roads between two rivers, he saw two barns that looked to have been burned, and a farmhouse that stood empty and broken-down: And an old man leaning over a wall told him that two armies had come one day and fought a violent and bloody battle in a field nearby, and then the victors had ridden off, taking captives in chains and leaving the dead behind. When the knight asked eagerly how long ago this had occurred the old man at first

scratched his head, and squinted up at the sky, and for a few moments looked puzzled; and finally said that he thought he had been about five years old at the time.

Now the knight rode on in anger, and when evening came he did not stop, but travelled through the night. But the following day he was weary, and, stopping at an inn, he drank sullenly in a corner until the landlord approached him and courteously asked his business.

The knight gave him a black look. "I ride in search of adventure," he said, in the manner of one who recites an old and tedious rhyme. "Can you tell me of anywhere that my sword and I might find employment?"

The landlord pursed his lips and looked doubtful; but then he said, "Yonder, on the hillside above this village, is a house where for many years a noble family of warriors lived; and mayhap there they might answer your question, though to speak sooth I know of no war that has been fought these thirty years, unless it be in foreign lands where folk are savage and cruel."

The knight thanked his host with barely adequate courtesy, and left the inn for the house in question. But as he rode towards it, an odd feeling stole over him, as though the sight of that building in some way disturbed him: And he shivered unaccountably, and drew his cloak tighter around him. Yet he came to the door without incident, and upon knocking was admitted, and led to a great hall where he was bidden to sit and eat; but all the time that he sat there, he looked about him as if in a daze, and the strange feeling persisted, though he could not tell why, or what the feeling was.

Then, as he was concluding his repast, the butler of the house came in, bringing him wine; and as he was about to pour it their eyes met, and the butler started, so that the wine was spilt. When the knight, wiping himself with a napkin, asked irritably for an explanation, the butler said querulously, "My lord, I hope you will forgive both my clumsiness and my presumption; but it seems to me that you have a look very like the master of this house, as I remember him, though he was a young man, not in his later years as you are, my lord."

At this the knight was seized with a sudden dread; and he asked fiercely what had become of the master of the house.

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"My lord," said the butler, "he rode away more than thirty years ago, to seek war and battle in foreign parts, and none of us has ever seen or heard of him since."

The knight trembled, and a deadly pallor came to his face. "For pity's sake," he cried harshly, "what country is this?" The butler looked startled, but answered readily enough, "Why, my lord, it is the land of Sarseny."

Then the dread that was upon the knight became black as doom, and he sprang from his chair with a cry and rushed out of the hall and out of the house; and finding his horse, he mounted with a leap, and rode off down the road full-pelt like a madman.

AND now years fled by, during which the knight roamed haphazardly through many lands; and in far-flung places the tale took root of a strange man, his face lined with age and a hidden anguish, who wore tarnished armour with an old device upon it and sat muttering to himself in tavern corners concerning an old-fashioned thing called war; but the knight himself took little note of his surroundings, for one place seemed to him now much like another, and the people he moved among wore the same uncomprehending smile; and always a nameless demon inside him forced him to travel on. Then one day he came to a place where there were no more towns and villages, and ahead of him he saw a hill reared up against the sky, upon whose summit stood a four-towered castle. It was dusk; and in a high window of the castle, a yellow light gleamed like a

star.

Then he rode apace to the castle, and was graciously received; and when he had eaten, the Lord came down from the library and sat beside the fire, and questioned him concerning his adventures, asking whether he had indeed found the Lands Beyond World's End. And the knight stirred, and with hesitant speech began to tell his tale, and the Lord listened in silence. When the tale was done, the knight sat for a while gazing into the fire; then, slowly, he unbuckled his scabbard and laid it across his knees.

"I shall not be needing this any more," he said. "You had best hang it up somewhere in the castle. It was a famous sword once, and did many great deeds in battle." Then, putting his hand to the hilt, he drew the sword out of the scabbard: And lo! the sword had crumbled away, and only a thin rime of rust clung to the cross-piece where the blade had been. With a sigh the knight let fall his hand, so that the hilt rested in his lap; and his head drooped sideways, and his eyes closed, and he slept.

And the Lord, rising softly to his feet, looked down at the old, wrinkled face and the white hair about it, and the thin hand that held the ruin of a sword; and he smiled a gentle smile. And going softly out of the hall, he went up the stairs to the library, where, closing the door, he took up from the table a heavy book bound in a chimaera's hide, and began once more to read.

Science fiction stories by Chris Naylor have been published in issues 1 and 2 of *Auguries*, the magazine of the South Hampshire SF Group, while verse has appeared in *First Time* and *Computer Weekly*. His poetry also won a prize in the 1981 National Poetry competition. Ongoing work is a fantasy novel running so far to 80,000 words. The story you have just read is one of half-a-dozen the author has written in a style reminiscent of Dunsany's tales of the 'little kingdom at the Edge of the World'.

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"There amid a crowd of animals lived a beautiful young mulatta."

House of Ill Repute

By JEFFREY GODDIN

Illustration by ALAN HUNTER

"WHO'S that?" I asked Thomas, trying not to choke on what Coin d'Argent was pleased to call its 'house whisky'.

"The gentleman with the prehensile mouth?"

"That's him."

We both turned to examine the tall, dissolute fellow whose skin might have been Webster's model for the adjective 'Sallow'. He wore a Zoot suit of ancient vintage, red stripes on black, which only emphasised his sickly leanness.

"That's Wilbur Carleton, once the major pimp in the Quarter."

"He seems to have fallen on hard times," I opined.

"Yes, pimping was his only really successful venture, and he blew that with a vengeance."

"How do you 'blow' pimping? The gendarmerie caught on?"

"You know as well as I," said Thomas, signing for another wretched drink, "that the police hereabouts couldn't care less." I almost whispered the word, "Disease?"

"That was part of it, in a way..."

"Then..."

"He chose a most unsuitable young lady for his stable, and she pretty well ruined

his business."

"One lady! I sense a story here."

"Indeed. If this," he held up his murky glass, "doesn't put me under first, I have a story for you."

"Carleton's main house - for he had three, at the height of his business - was on Esplanade, which is right on the edge of the Old Quarter. One day he got word of an older place, nearly a mansion, over near the eastern shore of Poinchartrain, which could be had for a song. He immediately conceived the idea of outfitting it as a kind of pleasure resort, where those who could afford a little drive from the heart of the city could come and, shall we say, satisfy all their tastes.

"He went out one day with two of his associates. You've seen one of them, Red Dog Johnson, who did time for beating up that fruit vendor down on Chales. Well, they went out to check on the mansion, and found it deserted and in great need of restoration, but not beyond fixing up.

"They found something else, or rather, someone. There amid a crowd of animals of all sorts lived a beautiful young mulatta, who called herself Honey Rose.

"Now Honey Rose was one of those girls you see sometimes come up from the islands, tall and willowy, with huge dark eyes and skin the colour of wild honey, which is undoubtedly where she got her name. Old Carleton took a fancy to her immediately, and since she was living there without anyone's say so, offered her a place to stay if she'd become one of his girls.

"You can't really blame Carleton for his error, for he was a person used to taking things and people on face value, and there was nothing in Honey, or her jars of herbs, her stacks of coloured candles, or the odd chicken bone here and there, to catch his attention. He should have picked up on the animals, though, and he should have paid more attention to the tantrum that Honey threw when he and his assistants tossed out the dogs, the cats, and the soulful-looking foxes and coons. She fairly went wild when he ate a couple of the chickens, slow roasted over an open fire.

"Honey was duly installed in not one, but a small suite, of rooms of her own, upstairs, which is a mark of how much value Carleton set on her. She seemed to all appearances to be quite content.

"The restoration proceeded apace.

Carleton got a couple of the best chefs on the waterfront, imported the best band he could find, all the way from Charleston, and outfitted the rooms with red plush wallpaper, purple velvet divans, and plenty of glossy black enamel. In other words, in the best brothel style.

"He even got some crystal chandeliers from an English privateer who was temporarily stranded at the south wharf. The whole business was rushed through in a couple of months.

"At first, he rotated girls from his other two houses, counting on Honey as his main attraction. Later, when the pinch was on, he scouted a couple of wild ones from the Carolinas. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Opening night saw a party that some of the old folks hereabouts still talk about. The finest Jamaican flowed like water, the band hit its hottest licks, and every major official, society climber or rich merchant was there, with a lovely on his knee, or just looking, watching the light glint from the gigantic chandeliers and looking forward to the night of pleasure to come.

"Tales of that first night circulated through the Quarter, and beyond, and the next weekend people came from Charleston, Natchez, even Baton Rouge, to sample the many pleasures that Carleton had provided. It came down to a checking of credentials and the issuing of a private guest list.

"It was a couple of weeks after the grand opening that a mysterious sickness began to appear in the city. You know about sleeping sickness? It was like that.

"People would go to bed and not get up. The health authorities - what authorities there were in those days - were at a loss as to where the disease came from, although blame finally came to light on a couple of French steamers that were just in from the South Pacific.

"Whatever the cause, the disease laid low some of the most faithful of Carleton's customers, that is to say, some of the most important people in the city. Carleton laid a quarantine at the door, and only the healthiest of citizens were allowed to participate in his gala Saturday nights.

"As if this were not enough, on the Sunday morning just a month and a day from his opening, a very distraught lady with two gentlemen of the law in tow came pounding on his door to look for her husband. Carleton, who had decided to

make his permanent residence in this new house, personally searched all of the rooms to see that none of the girls were harbouring the missing gentleman. He noticed with some chagrin that Honey was once again accumulating animals - a fox, and a couple of spaniel-like dogs, but passed her over in his desire to be rid of the irate wife and her official escort.

"Finally, Carleton got free of his visitors, and, being in a somewhat bad fram of mind, went up to throw Honey around a bit. He found her heating a fragrant, creamy-looking liquid over a candle in a little copper ladle. She held it out for him to sniff, and the next thing he knows he's waking up on one of his fine velvet divans with a couple of the girls hovering anxiously over him.

"Carleton wasn't feeling so well. He went to bed, and didn't get up the next day. It seemed that the sleeping sickness that had been ravaging the city had finally caught up with him. He found a doctor and left the house in the capable hands of his most disreputable assistant.

"In the midst of the plague fear that was taking New Orleans, Carleton's house provided a little island of calm. Everyone talked about the disappearance of Grimaldi, whose wife had come with the police, and there was talk about other disappearances, all of them habitués of Carleton's house.

"This, however, only added a certain dangerous charm to the already highly-popular establishment. It became harder and harder to filter the crowd who showed up on Saturday nights. Altogether, the atmosphere was most intriguing.

"It was one full moon night in August, hotter than a tug boiler, that matters finally came to a head. A party of diplomats was loosening up at Carleton's, and, since the fame and beauty of Honey Rose had spread far beyond the confines of the city by then, they all knew about her and were drawing straws as to who should be the first to enjoy her favours.

"The winner was one Deschand, a Devil-may-care individual who had left a string of successful duels and broken hearts across Europe. He assured his comrades that he would be back down the winding crimson stairs in fifteen minutes, in order that he might play an unbeatable hand that all had bet considerable sums on.

"Fifteen minutes passed. His three comrades sipped the absinthe that only

Carleton was now able to obtain, and waited. Twenty minutes passed, and a curious thing happened. One of Honey Rose's animals, a blonde spaniel, raced down the stairs, looked around and made for the diplomats' table, where it began to tug on the leg of old Bosschere, the Legate. At first the man kicked the dog away, but it came back, and made little runs towards the stairs, then turned and looked at him, and repeated its actions, as if beckoning him to follow.

"There was a touch of the superstitious about Bosschere, and the anxious dog, the absinthe, and the fact that his friend was taking nearly half an hour to prove himself upstairs, made him decide to follow the animal.

"Up the stairs the dog led, the three diplomats laughing and joking and making fun of themselves for following a spaniel. The dog led them to Honey Rose's suite, and without pausing to knock Bosschere pushed open the door. He froze in his tracks.

"The rug had been pushed back. In the centre of a circle drawn in red on the boards of an old oaken floor, stark naked, crouched the peerless Deschand in the posture of a fawning dog.

"Hovering over him, her fine breasts tightened with excitement, stood the mulatta. She was just about to anoint Deschand with a viscous fluid from a copper ladle when Bosschere and his friends piled into the room.

"Honey Rose gave a quick scream and bolted past the astonished diplomats, down the winding stairs and out through the diners into the steamy darkness. With some effort, Deschand was restored to his senses. When he came to himself, he recoiled from the animals that still lolled about the Mulatta's room and bolted almost as fast as Honey Rose.

"The whole story was almost too clear to those of Carleton's clientele with Creole blood. Business was never the same, for a lingering distrust of Carleton's girls scared off the best customers.

"Carleton himself finally recovered from the strange sickness, as did most of the other victims, but he'd lost his drive. He turned to bootlegging in a small way and managed to keep his smallest house in the city, but he's been on pretty hard times ever since."

We both looked over to the bar, where the gaunt figure of Carleton was quaffing the infamous 'house whisky' and trying

to get the attention of one of the barmaids. He seemed in the last stages of exhaustion, but then, no doubt he sleeps badly.

His dreams are probably haunted by the

person of a beautiful, honey-coloured mulatta, a woman of many talents. Perhaps, too, he can't help but speculate on the true ancestry of some chicken he once ate.

Jeffrey Goddin tells us he is currently teaching non-fiction writing courses at universities in Indiana whilst trying to market two horror novels. His shorter work can be found in such magazines as *Potboiler*, *Space & Time*, *Weirdbook*, *Rod Serling's Twilight Zone*, *Mike Shayne's*, and *DAW Books' Year's Best Horror Stories*.



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"Do you believe in me?..."



The FORBIDDEN

By CLIVE BARKER

Illustration by JOHN STEWART

*A Terror Tale from
the Books of Blood!*



...I am Rumour."

Already a respected playwright (with such genre titles as *The History of the Devil*, *Frankenstein in Love* and *The Secret Life of Cartoons*), Clive Barker made an impressive debut as a horror writer in 1984 with the publication of his first short story collections, *Clive Barker's Books of Blood*, published simultaneously in three volumes by Sphere Books. Since then his reputation has grown considerably, and in 1985 he has consolidated his position with a host of projects: This summer Sphere will publish a further trio of *Books of Blood* and later in the year his first novel, *The Damnation Game*, is due in hardcover from Weidenfeld. Scream/Press has announced a compilation volume of the first three *Books of Blood* to appear at the 1985 World Fantasy Convention, and a new horror film, *Underworld*, was recently completed from the author's original screenplay. We are therefore extremely proud to present a new story from Volume 5 of *Books of Blood*...

LIKE a flawless tragedy, the elegance of which structure is lost upon those suffering in it, the perfect geometry of the Spector Street Estate was only visible from the air. Walking in its drear canyons, passing through its grimy corridors from one grey concrete rectangle to the next, there was little to seduce the eye or stimulate the imagination. What few saplings had been planted in the quadrangles had long since been mutilated or uprooted; the grass, though tall, resolutely refused a healthy green.

No doubt the estate and its two companion developments had once been an architect's dream. No doubt the city-planners had wept with pleasure at a design which housed three and thirty-six persons per hectare, and still boasted space for a children's playground. Doubtless fortunes and reputations had been built upon Spector Street, and at its opening fine words had been spoken of it being a yardstick by which all future developments would be measured. But the planners - tears wept, words spoken - had left the estate to its own devices; the architects occupied restored Georgian houses at the other end of the city, and probably never set foot here.

They would not have been shamed by the deterioration of the estate even if they had. Their brain-child (they would doubtless argue) was as brilliant as ever: Its geometries as precise, its ratios as calculated; it was *people* who had spoiled Spector Street. Nor would they have been wrong in such an accusation. Helen had seldom seen an inner city environment so comprehensively vandalized. Lamps had been shattered and back-yard fences overthrown; cars, whose wheels and engines had been removed and chassis then burned, blocked garage facilities. In one courtyard three or four ground-floor maisonettes had been entirely gutted by fire, their windows and doors boarded up with planks and corrugated iron.

More startling still was the graffiti. That was what she had come here to see, encouraged by Archie's talk of the place, and she was not disappointed. It was difficult to believe, staring at the multiple layers of designs, names, obscenities, and dogmas that were scrawled and sprayed on every available brick, that Spector Street was barely three and a half years old. The walls, so recently virgin, were now so profoundly defaced that the Council Cleaning Department could never hope to return them to their former condition. A layer of whitewash to cancel this visual cacophony would only offer the scribes a fresh and yet more tempting surface on which to make their mark.

Helen was in seventh heaven. Every corner she turned offered some fresh material for her thesis: '*Graffiti: the semiotics of urban despair*'. It was a subject which married her two favourite disciplines - sociology and aesthetics - and as she wandered around the estate she began to wonder if there wasn't a book, in addition to her thesis, in the subject. She walked from courtyard to courtyard, copying down a large number of the more interesting scrawlings, and noting their location. Then she went back to the car to collect her camera and tripod and returned to the most fertile of the areas, to make a thorough visual record of the walls.

It was a chilly business. She was not an expert photographer, and the late October sky was in full flight, shifting the light on the bricks from one moment to the next. As she adjusted and re-adjusted the exposure to compensate for the light changes her fingers steadily became clumsier, her temper correspondingly thinner. But she struggled on, the idle curiosity of passers-by notwithstanding. There were so many designs to document. She reminded herself that her present discomfort would be amply repaid when

she showed the slides to Trevor, whose doubt of the project's validity had been perfectly apparent from the beginning.

"The writing on the wall?" he'd said, half smiling in that irritating fashion of his, "It's been done a hundred times."

This was true, of course; and yet not. There certainly were learned works on graffiti, chock-full of sociological jargon: *cultural disenfranchisement*; *urban alienation*. But she flattered herself that she might find something amongst this litter of scrawlings that previous analysts had not: Some unifying convention perhaps, that she could use as the lynchpin of her thesis. Only a vigorous cataloguing and cross-referencing of the phrases and images before her would reveal such a correspondence; hence the importance of the photographic study. So many hands had worked here; so many minds left their mark, however casually: If she could find some pattern, some predominant motive, or motif, the thesis would be guaranteed some serious attention, and so, in turn, would she.

"What are you doing?" a voice from behind her asked.

She turned from her calculations to see a young woman with a pushchair on the pavement behind her. She looked weary, Helen thought, and pinched by the cold. The child in the pushchair was mewling, his grimy fingers clutching an orange lollipop and the wrapping from a chocolate bar. The bulk of the chocolate, and the remains of previous jujubes, was displayed down the front of his coat.

Helen offered a thin smile to the woman; she looked in need of it.

"I'm photographing the walls," she said in answer to the initial enquiry, though surely this was perfectly apparent.

The woman - Helen judged she could barely be twenty - said: "You mean the filth?"

"The writing and the pictures," Helen said. Then: "Yes. The filth."

"You from the Council?"

"No, the University."

"It's bloody disgusting," the woman said. "The way they do that. It's not just kids, either."

"No?"

"Grown men. Grown men, too. They don't give a damn. Do it in broad daylight. You see 'em...broad daylight." She glanced down at the child, who was sharpening his lollipop on the ground. "Kerry!" she snapped, but the boy took no notice. "Are

they going to wipe it off?" she asked Helen.

"I don't know," Helen said, and reiterated: "I'm from the University."

"Oh," the woman replied, as if this was new information, "so you're nothing to do with the Council?"

"No."

"Some of it's obscene, isn't it?; really dirty. Makes me embarrassed to see some of the things they draw."

Helen nodded, casting an eye at the boy in the pushchair. Kerry had decided to put his sweet in his ear for safe-keeping.

"Don't do that!" his mother told him, and leaned over to slap the child's hand. The blow, which was negligible, began the child bawling. Helen took the opportunity to return to her camera. But the woman still desired to talk. "It's not just on the outside, neither," she commented.

"I beg your pardon?" Helen said.

"They break into the flats when they go empty. The Council tried to board them up, but it does no good. They break in anyway. Use them as toilets, and write more filth on the walls. They light fires too. Then nobody can move back in."

The description piqued Helen's curiosity. Would the graffiti on the inside walls be substantially different from the public displays? It was certainly worth an investigation.

"Are there any places you know of around here like that?"

"Empty flats, you mean?"

"With graffiti."

"Just by us, there's one or two," the woman volunteered. "I'm in Butts' Court."

"Maybe you could show me?" Helen asked.

The woman shrugged.

"By the way, my name's Helen Buchanan."

"Anne-Marie," the mother replied.

"I'd be very grateful if you could point me to one of those empty flats."

Anne-Marie was baffled by Helen's enthusiasm, and made no attempt to disguise it, but she shrugged again and said: "There's nothing much to see. Only more of the same stuff."

Helen gathered up her equipment and they walked side by side through the intersecting corridors between one square and the next. Though the estate was low-rise, each court only five storeys high, the effect of each quadrangle was horribly claustrophobic. The walkways and staircases

were a thief's dream, rife with blind corners and ill-lit tunnels. The rubbish-dumping facilities - chutes from the upper floors down which bags of refuse could be pitched - had long since been sealed up, thanks to their efficiency as fire-traps. Now plastic bags of refuse were piled high in the corridors, many torn open by roaming dogs, their contents strewn across the ground. The smell, even in the cold weather, was unpleasant. In high summer it must have been overpowering.

"I'm over the other side," Anne-Marie said, pointing across the quadrangle. "The one with the yellow door." She then pointed along the opposite side of the court. "Five or six maisonnettes from the far end," she said. "There's two of them been emptied out. Few weeks now. One of the family's moved into Ruskin Court; the other did a bunk in the middle of the night."

With that, she turned her back on Helen and wheeled Kerry, who had taken to trailing spittle from the side of his pushchair, around the side of the square.

"Thank you," Helen called after her. Anne-Marie glanced over her shoulder briefly, but did not reply. Appetite whetted, Helen made her way along the row of ground floor maisonnettes, many of which, though inhabited, showed little sign of being so. Their curtains were closely drawn; there were no milk-bottles on the doorsteps, nor children's toys left where they had been played with. Nothing, in fact, of *life* here. There was more graffiti however, sprayed, shockingly, on the doors of occupied houses. She granted the scrawlings only a casual perusal, in part because she feared one of the doors opening as she examined a choice obscenity sprayed upon it, but more because she was eager to see what revelations the empty flats ahead might offer.

The malign scent of urine, both fresh and stale, welcomed her at the threshold of number 14, and beneath that the smell of burnt paint and plastic. She hesitated for fully ten seconds, wondering if stepping into the maisonnette was a wise move. The territory of the estate behind her was indisputably foreign, sealed off in its own misery, but the rooms in front of her were more intimidating still: A dark maze which her eyes could barely penetrate. But when her courage faltered she thought of Trevor, and how badly she wanted to silence his condescension. So

thinking, she advanced into the place, deliberately kicking a piece of charred timber aside as she did so, in the hope that she would alert any tenant into showing himself.

There was no sound of occupancy however. Gaining confidence, she began to explore the front room of the maisonnette which had been - to judge by the remains of a disembowelled sofa in one corner and the sodden carpet underfoot - a living-room. The pale-green walls were, as Anne-Marie had promised, extensively defaced, both by minor scribbles - content to work in pen, or even more crudely in sofa charcoal - and by those with aspirations to public works, who had sprayed the walls in half a dozen colours.

Some of the comments were of interest, though many she had already seen on the walls outside. Familiar names and coupleings repeated themselves. Though she had never set eyes on these individuals she knew how badly Fabian J. (A.O.K.) wanted to deflower Michelle; and that Michelle, in her turn, had the hots for somebody called Mr Sheen. Here, as elsewhere, a man called White Rat boasted of his endowment, and the return of the Syllabub Brothers was promised in red paint. One or two of the pictures accompanying, or at least adjacent to these phrases were of particular interest. An almost emblematic simplicity informed them. Beside the word *Christos* was a stick man with his hair radiating from his head like spines, and other heads impaled on each spine. Close by was an image of intercourse so brutally reduced that at first Helen took it to illustrate a knife plunging into a sightless eye. But fascinating as the images were, the room was too gloomy for her film, and she had neglected to bring a flash. If she wanted a reliable record of these discoveries she would have to come again, and for now be content with a simple exploration of the premises.

The maisonnette wasn't that large, but the windows had been boarded up throughout, and as she moved further from the front door the dubious light petered out altogether. The smell of urine, which had been strong at the door, intensified too, until by the time she reached the back living-room and stepped along a short corridor into another room beyond, it was as cloying as incense. This room, being furthest from the front door, was also the darkest, and she had to wait a few moments in the cluttered gloom to

allow her eyes to become useful. This, she guessed, had been the bedroom. What little furniture the residents had left behind them had been smashed to smithereens. Only the mattress had been left relatively untouched, dumped in the corner of the room amongst a wretched litter of blankets, newspapers, and pieces of crockery.

Outside, the sun found its way between the clouds, and two or three shafts of sunlight slipped between the boards nailed across the bedroom window and pierced the room like annunciations, scoring the opposite wall with bright lines. Here, the graffitiists had been busy once more: The usual clamour of love-letters and threats. She scanned the wall quickly, and as she did so her eye was led by the beams of light across the room to the wall which contained the door she had stepped through.

Here, the artists had also been at work, but had produced an image the like of which she had not seen anywhere else. Using the door, which was centrally placed in the wall, as a mouth, the artists had sprayed a single, vast head on to the stripped plaster. The painting was more adroit than most she had seen, rife with detail that lent the image an unsettling veracity. The cheekbones jutting through skin the colour of butter-milk; the teeth - sharpened to irregular points - all converging on the door. The sitter's eyes were, owing to the room's low ceiling, set mere inches above the upper lip, but this physical adjustment only lent force to the image, giving the impression that he had thrown his head back. Knotted strands of his hair snaked from his scalp across the ceiling.

Was it a portrait? There was something naggingly *specific* in the details of the brows and the lines around the wide mouth; in the careful picturing of those vicious teeth. A nightmare certainly: A facsimile, perhaps, of something from a heroin fugue. Whatever its origins, it was potent. Even the illusion of door-as-mouth worked. The short passageway between living-room and bedroom offered a passable throat, with a tattered lamp in lieu of tonsils. Beyond the gullet, the day burned white in the nightmare's belly. The whole effect brought to mind a ghost train painting. The same heroic deformity, the same unshamed intention to scare. And it worked. She stood in the bedroom almost stupefied by the picture, its red-

rilled eyes fixing her mercilessly. Tomorrow, she determined, she would come here again, this time with high-speed film and a flash to illuminate the masterwork.

As she prepared to leave the sun went in, and the bands of light faded. She glanced over her shoulder at the boarded windows, and saw for the first time that one four-word slogan had been sprayed on the wall beneath them.

'Sweets to the sweet' it read. She was familiar with the quote, but not with its source. Was it a profession of love? If so, it was an odd location for such an avowal. Despite the mattress in the corner, and the relative privacy of this room, she could not imagine the intended reader of such words ever stepping in here to receive her bouquet. No adolescent lovers, however heated, would lie down here to play at mothers and fathers; not under the gaze of the terror on the wall. She crossed to examine the writing. The paint looked to be the same shade of pink as had been used to colour the gums of the screaming man; perhaps the same hand?

Behind her, a noise. She turned so quickly she almost tripped over the blanket-strewn mattress.

"Who -?"

At the other end of the gullet, in the living-room, was a scab-kneed boy of six or seven. He stared at Helen, eyes glittering in the half-light, as if waiting for a cue.

"Yes?" she said.

"Anne-Marie says do you want a cup of tea?" he declared without pause or intonation.

Her conversation with the woman seemed hours past. She was grateful for the invitation however. The damp maisonette had chilled her.

"Yes..." she said to the boy. "Yes please."

The child didn't move, but simply stared on at her.

"Are you going to lead the way?" she asked him.

"If you want," he replied, unable to raise a trace of enthusiasm.

"I'd like that."

"You taking photographs?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am. But not in here."

"Why not?"

"It's too dark," she told him.

"Don't it work in the dark?" he wanted to know.

"No."

The boy nodded at this, as if the information somehow fitted well into his scheme of things, and about-turned without another word, clearly expecting Helen to follow.

IF SHE had been taciturn in the street, Anne-Marie was anything but in the privacy of her own kitchen. Gone was the guarded curiosity, to be replaced by a stream of lively chatter and a constant scurrying between half-a-dozen minor domestic tasks, like a juggler keeping several plates spinning simultaneously. Helen watched this balancing act with some admiration; her own domestic skills were negligible. At last, the meandering conversation turned back to the subject that had brought Helen here.

"Them photographs," Anne-Marie said, "why'd you want to take them?"

"I'm writing about graffiti. The photos will illustrate my thesis."

"It's not very pretty."

"No, you're right, it isn't. But I find it interesting."

Anne-Marie shook her head. "I hate the whole estate," she said. "It's not safe here. People getting robbed on their own doorsteps. Kids setting fire to the rubbish day in, day out. Last summer we had the fire brigade here two, three times a day, 'til they sealed them chutes off. Now people just dump the bags in the passageways, and that attracts rats."

"Do you live here alone?"

"Yes," she said, "since Davey walked out."

"That your husband?"

"He was Kerry's father, but we weren't never married. We lived together two years, you know. We had some good times. Then he just upped and went off one day when I was at me Mam's with Kerry." She peered into her tea-cup. "I'm better off without him," she said. "But you get scared sometimes. Want some more tea?"

"I don't think I've got time."

"Just a cup," Anne-Marie said, already up and unplugging the electric kettle to take it across for a re-fill. As she was about to turn on the tap she saw something on the draining board, and drove her thumb down, grinding it out. "Got you, you bugger," she said, then turned to Helen: "We got these bloody ants."

"Ants?"

"Whole estate's infected. From Egypt, they are: Pharaoh ants, they're called.

Little brown sods. They breed in the central heating ducts, you see; that way they get into all the flats. Place is plagued with them."

This unlikely exoticism (ants from Egypt?) struck Helen as comical, but she said nothing. Anne-Marie was staring out of the kitchen window and into the backyard.

"You should tell them -" she said, though Helen wasn't certain whom she was being instructed to tell, "tell them that ordinary people can't even walk the streets any longer -"

"Is it really so bad?" Helen said, frankly tiring of this catalogue of misfortunes.

Anne-Marie turned from the sink and looked at her hard.

"We've had murders here," she said.

"Really?"

"We had one in the summer. An old man he was, from Ruskin. That's just next door. I didn't know him, but he was a friend of the sister of the woman next door. I forget his name."

"And he was murdered?"

"Cut to ribbons in his own front room. They didn't find him for almost a week."

"What about his neighbours? Didn't they notice his absence?"

Anne-Marie shrugged, as if the most important pieces of information - the murder and the man's isolation - had been exchanged, and any further enquiries into the problem were irrelevant. But Helen pressed the point.

"Seems strange to me," she said.

Anne-Marie plugged in the filled kettle. "Well, it happened," she replied, unmoved.

"I'm not saying it didn't, I just -"

"His eyes had been taken out," she said, before Helen could voice any further doubts.

Helen winced. "No," she said, under her breath.

"That's the truth," Anne-Marie said.

"And that wasn't all'd been done to him." She paused, for effect, then went on: "You wonder what kind of person's capable of doing things like that, don't you? You wonder." Helen nodded. She was thinking precisely the same thing.

"Did they ever find the man responsible?"

Anne-Marie snorted her disparagement. "Police don't give a damn what happens here. They keep off the estate as much as possible. When they do patrol all

they do is pick up kids for getting drunk and that. They're afraid, you see. That's why they keep clear."

"Of this killer?"

"Maybe," Anne-Marie replied. Then: "He had a hook."

"A hook?"

"The man what done it. He had a hook, like Jack the Ripper."

Helen was no expert on murder, but she felt certain that the Ripper hadn't boasted a hook. It seemed churlish to question the truth of Anne-Marie's story however; though she silently wondered how much of this - the eyes taken out, the body rotting in the flat, the hook - was elaboration. The most scrupulous of reporters was surely tempted to embellish a story once in a while.

Anne-Marie had poured herself another cup of tea, and was about to do the same for her guest.

"No thank you," Helen said, "I really should go."

"You married?" Anne-Marie asked, out of the blue.

"Yes. To a lecturer from the University."

"What's his name?"

"Trevor."

Anne-Marie put two heaped spoonfuls of sugar into her cup of tea. "Will you be coming back?" she asked.

"Yes, I hope to. Later in the week. I want to take some photographs of the pictures in the maisonette across the court."

"Well, call in."

"I shall. And thank you for your help."

"That's all right," Anne-Marie replied.

"You've got to tell somebody, haven't you?"

"THE man apparently had a hook instead of a hand."

Trevor looked up from his plate of *tagliatelle con prosciutto*.

"Beg your pardon?"

Helen had been at pains to keep her recounting of this story as uncoloured by her own response as she could. She was interested to know what Trevor would make of it, and she knew that if she once signalled her own stance he would instinctively take an opposing view out of plain bloody-mindedness.

"He had a hook," she repeated, without inflexion.

Trevor put down his fork, and plucked at his nose, sniffing. "I didn't read anything about this," he said.

"You don't look at the local press," Helen returned. "Neither of us do. Maybe it never made any of the nationals."

"Geriatric Murdered By Hook-Handed Maniac?" Trevor said, savouring the hyperbole. "I would have thought it very newsworthy. When was all of this supposed to have happened?"

"Sometime last summer. Maybe we were in Ireland."

"Maybe," said Trevor, taking up his fork again. Bending to his food, the polished lens of his spectacles reflected only the plate of pasta and chopped ham in front of him, not his eyes.

"Why do you say *maybe*?" Helen prodded.

"It doesn't sound quite right," he said. "In fact it sounds bloody preposterous."

"You don't believe it?" Helen said.

Trevor looked up from his food, tongue rescuing a speck of *tagliatelle* from the corner of his mouth. His face had relaxed into that non-committal expression of his - the same face he wore, no doubt, when listening to his students. "Do you believe it?" he asked Helen. It was a favourite time-gaining device of his, another seminar trick, to question the questioner.

"I'm not certain," Helen replied, too concerned to find some solid ground in this sea of doubts to waste energy scoring points.

"All right, forget the tale -" Trevor said, deserting his food for another glass of red wine. "- What about the teller? Did you trust her?"

Helen pictured Anne-Marie's earnest expression as she told the story of the old man's murder. "Yes," she said. "Yes; I think I would have known if she'd been lying to me."

"So why's it so important, anyhow? I mean, whether she's lying or not, what the fuck does it matter?"

It was a reasonable question, if irritatingly put. Why *did* it matter? Was it that she wanted to have her worst feelings about Spector Street proved false? That such an estate be filthy, be hopeless, be a dump where the undesirable and the disadvantaged were tucked out of public view - all that was a liberal commonplace, and she accepted it as an unpalatable social reality. But the story of the old man's murder and mutilation was something other. An image of violent death that, once with her, refused to part from her company.

She realized, to her chagrin, that

this confusion was plain on her face, and that Trevor, watching her across the table, was not a little entertained by it.

"If it bothers you so much," he said, "why don't you go back there and ask around, instead of playing believe-in-it-or-not over dinner?"

She couldn't help but rise to his remark. "I thought you liked guessing games," she said.

He threw her a sullen look.

"Wrong again."

THE suggestion that she investigate was not a bad one, though doubtless he had ulterior motives for offering it. She viewed Trevor less charitably day by day. What she had once thought in him a fierce commitment to debate she now recognized as mere power-play. He argued, not for the thrill of dialectic, but because he was pathologically competitive. She had seen him, time and again, take up attitudes she knew he did not espouse, simply to spill blood. Nor, more's the pity, was he alone in this sport. Academe was one of the last strongholds of the professional time-waster. On occasion their circle seemed entirely dominated by educated fools, lost in a wasteland of stale rhetoric and hollow commitment.

From one wasteland to another. She returned to Spector Street the following day, armed with a flashgun in addition to her tripod and high-sensitive film. The wind was up today, and it was Arctic, more furious still for being trapped in the maze of passageways and courts. She made her way to number 14, and spent the next hour in its befouled confines, meticulously photographing both the bedroom and living-room walls. She had half expected the impact of the head in the bedroom to be dulled by re-acquaintance; it was not. Though she struggled to capture its scale and detail as best she could, she knew the photographs would be at best a dim echo of its perpetual howl.

Much of its power lay in its context, of course. That such an image might be stumbled upon in surroundings so drab, so conspicuously lacking in mystery, was akin to finding an icon on a rubbish-heap: A gleaming symbol of transcendence from a world of toil and decay into some darker but more tremendous realm. She was painfully aware that the intensity of her response probably defied her articulation. Her vocabulary was analytic, replete with buzz-words and academic terminology, but

woefully impoverished when it came to evocation. The photographs, pale as they would be, would, she hoped, at least hint at the potency of this picture, even if they couldn't conjure the way it froze the bowels.

When she emerged from the maisonette the wind was as uncharitable as ever, but the boy was waiting outside - the same child as had attended upon her yesterday - dressed as if for spring weather. He grimaced in his effort to keep the shudders at bay.

"Hello," Helen said.

"I waited," the child announced.

"Waited?"

"Anne-Marie said you'd come back.

"I wasn't planning to come until later in the week," Helen said. "You might have waited a long time."

The boy's grimace relaxed a notch. "It's all right," he said, "I've got nothing to do."

"What about school?"

"Don't like it," the boy replied, as if obliged to be educated if it wasn't to his taste.

"I see," said Helen, and began to walk down the side of the quadrangle. The boy followed. On the patch of grass at the centre of the quadrangle several chairs and two or three dead saplings had been piled.

"What's this?" she said, half to herself.

"Bonfire Night," the boy informed her. "Next week."

"Of course."

"You going to see Anne-Marie?" he asked.

"Yes."

"She's not in."

"Oh. Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Well, perhaps you can help me..."

She stopped and turned to face the child; smooth sacs of fatigue hung beneath his eyes. "I heard about an old man who was murdered near here," she said to him. "In the summer. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

"Nothing at all? You don't remember anybody getting killed?"

"No," the boy said again, with impressive finality. "I don't remember."

"Well; thank you anyway."

This time, when she retraced her steps back to the car, the boy didn't follow. But as she turned the corner out of the quadrangle she glanced back to see him

standing on the spot where she'd left him, staring after her as if she were a mad-woman.

By the time she had reached the car and packed the photographic equipment into the boot there were specks of rain in the wind, and she was sorely tempted to forget she'd ever heard Anne-Marie's story and make her way home, where the coffee would be warm even if the welcome wasn't. But she needed an answer to the question Trevor had put the previous night. Do you believe it?, he'd asked when she'd told him the story. She hadn't known how to answer then, and she still didn't. Perhaps (why did she sense this?) the terminology of verifiable truth was redundant here; perhaps the final answer to his question was not an answer at all, only another question. If so; so. She had to find out.

Ruskin Court was as forlorn as its fellows, if not more so. It didn't even boast a bonfire. On the third floor balcony a woman was taking washing in before the rain broke; on the grass in the centre of the quadrangle two dogs were absent-mindedly rutting, the fuckee staring up at the blank sky. As she walked along the empty pavement she set her face determinedly; a purposeful look, Bernadette had once said, deterred attack. When she caught sight of the two women talking at the far end of the court she crossed over to them hurriedly, grateful for their presence.

"Excuse me?"

The women, both in middle-age, ceased their animated exchange and looked her over.

"I wonder if you can help me?"

She could feel their appraisal, and their distrust; they went undisguised. One of the pair, her face florid, said plainly: "What do you want?"

Helen suddenly felt bereft of the least power to charm. What was she to say to these two that wouldn't make her motives appear ghoulish? "I was told..." she began, and then stumbled, aware that she would get no assistance from either woman. "...I was told there'd been a murder near here. Is that right?"

The florid woman raised eyebrows so plucked they were barely visible. "Murder?" she said.

"Are you from the press?" the other woman enquired. The years had soured her features beyond sweetening. Her small mouth was deeply lined; her hair, which

had been dyed brunette, showed a half-inch of grey at the roots.

"No, I'm not from the press," Helen said, "I'm a friend of Anne-Marie's in Butts' Court." This claim of friend stretched the truth, but it seemed to mellow the women somewhat.

"Visiting are you?" the florid woman asked.

"In a manner of speaking -"

"You missed the warm spell -"

"Anne-Marie was telling me about somebody who'd been murdered here, during the summer. I was curious about it."

"Is that right?"

"- do you know anything about it?"

"Lots of things go on around here," said the second woman. "You don't know the half of it."

"So it's true," Helen said.

"They had to close the toilets," the first woman put in.

"That's right. They did," the other said.

"The toilets?" Helen said. What had this to do with the old man's death?

"It was terrible," the first said.

"Was it your Frank, Josie, who told you about it?"

"No, not Frank," Josie replied. "Frank was still at sea. It was Mrs Tyzack."

The witness established, Josie relin- quished the story to her companion, and turned her gaze back upon Helen. The sus- picion had not yet died from her eyes.

"This was only the month before last," Josie said. "Just about the end of August. It was August, wasn't it?" She looked to the other woman for verification. "You've got the head for dates, Maureen."

Maureen looked uncomfortable. "I forget," she said, clearly unwilling to offer testimony.

"I'd like to know," Helen said. Josie, despite her companion's reluctance, was eager to oblige.

"There's some lavatories," she said, "outside the shops - you know, public lavatories. I'm not quite sure how it all happened exactly, but there used to be a boy...well, he wasn't a boy really, I mean he was a man of twenty or more, but he was..." she fished for the words, "... mentally subnormal, I suppose you'd say. His mother used to have to take him around like he was a four-year-old. Anyway, she let him go into the lavatories while she went to that little supermarket, what's it called?" she turned to Maureen for a prompt, but the other woman just looked

back, her disapproval plain. Josie was ungovernable, however. "Broad daylight, this was," she said to Helen. "Middle of the day. Anyhow, the boy went to the toilet, and the mother was in the shop. And after a while, you know how you do, she's busy shopping, she forgets about him, and then she thinks he's been gone a long time..."

At this juncture Maureen couldn't prevent herself from butting in: The accuracy of the story apparently took precedence over her wariness.

"- She got into an argument," she corrected Josie, "with the manager. About some bad bacon she'd had from him. That was why she was such a time..."

"I see," said Helen.

"- Anyway," said Josie, picking up the tale, "she finished her shopping and when she came out he still wasn't there -"

"So she asked someone from the supermarket -" Maureen began, but Josie wasn't about to have her narrative snatched back at this vital juncture.

"She asked one of the men from the supermarket -" she repeated over Maureen's interjection, "to go down into the lavatory and find him."

"It was terrible," said Maureen, clearly picturing the atrocity in her mind's eye.

"He was lying on the floor, in a pool of blood."

"Murdered?"

Josie shook her head. "He'd have been better off dead. He'd been attacked with a razor -" she let this piece of information sink in before delivering the *coup de grâce*, "- and they'd cut off his private parts. Just cut them off and flushed them down a toilet. No reason on earth to do it."

"Oh my God."

"Better off dead," Josie repeated. "I mean, they can't mend something like that, can they?"

The appalling tale was rendered worse still by the *sang-froid* of the teller, and by the casual repetition of "Better off dead".

"The boy," Helen said, "Was he able to describe his attackers?"

"No," said Josie, "he's practically an imbecile. He can't string more than two words together."

"And nobody saw anyone go into the lavatory? Or leaving it?"

"People come and go all the time -" Maureen said. This, though it sounded like an adequate explanation, had not

been Helen's experience. There was not a great bustle in the quadrangle and passageways; far from it. Perhaps the shopping mall was busier, she reasoned, and might offer adequate cover for such a crime.

"So they haven't found the culprit," she said.

"No," Josie replied, her eyes losing their fervour. The crime and its immediate consequences were the nub of this story; she had little or no interest in either the culprit or his capture.

"We're not safe in our own beds," Maureen observed. "You ask anyone."

"Anne-Marie said the same," Helen replied. "That's how she came to tell me about the old man. Said he was murdered during the summer, here in Ruskin Court."

"I do remember something," Josie said. "There was some talk I heard. An old man, and his dog. He was battered to death, and the dog ended up...I don't know. It certainly wasn't here. It must have been one of the other estates."

"Are you sure?"

The woman looked offended by this slur on her memory. "Oh yes," she said, "I mean if it had been here, we'd have known the story, wouldn't we?"

HELEN thanked the pair for their help and decided to take a stroll around the quadrangle anyway, just to see how many more maisonettes were out of operation here. As in Butts' Court, many of the curtains were drawn and all the doors locked. But then if Spector Street was under siege from a maniac capable of the murder and mutilation such as she'd heard described, she was not surprised that the residents took to their homes and stayed there. There was nothing much to see around the court. All the unoccupied maisonettes and flats had been recently sealed, to judge by a litter of nails left on a doorstep by the council workmen. One sight *did* catch her attention, however. Scrawled on the paving stones she was walking over - and all but erased by rain and the passage of feet - the same phrase she'd seen in the bedroom of number 14: *Sweets to the sweet*. The words were so benign; why did she seem to sense menace in them? Was it in their excess, perhaps, in the sheer overabundance of sugar upon sugar, honey upon honey?

She walked on, though the rain persisted, and her walkabout gradually led her away from the quadrangles and into a concrete no-man's-land through which she had

not previously passed. This was - or had been - the site of the estate's amenities. Here was the children's playground, its metal-framed rides overturned, its sandpit fouled by dogs, its paddling pool empty. And here too were shops. Several had been boarded up now; those that hadn't were dingy and unattractive, their windows protected by heavy wire-mesh.

She walked along the row, and rounded a corner, and there in front of her was a squat brick building. The public lavatory, she guessed, though the signs designating it as such had gone. The iron gates were closed and padlocked. Standing in front of the charmless building, the wind gusting around her legs, she couldn't help but think of what had happened here. Of the man-child, bleeding on the floor, helpless to cry out. It made her queasy even to contemplate it. She turned her thoughts instead to the felon. What would he look like, she wondered, a man capable of such depravities? She tried to make an image of him, but no detail she could conjure carried sufficient force. But then monsters were seldom very terrible once hauled into the plain light of day. As long as this man was known only by his deeds he held untold power over the imagination; but the human truth beneath the terrors would, she knew, be bitterly disappointing. No monster he; just a whey-faced apology for a man more needful of pity than awe.

The next gust of wind brought the rain on more heavily. It was time, she decided, to be done with adventures for the day. Turning her back on the public lavatories she hurried back through the quadrangles to the refuge of the car, the icy rain needling her face to numbness.

THE dinner guests looked gratifyingly appalled at the story, and Trevor, to judge by the expression on his face, was furious. It was done now, however; there was no taking it back. Nor could she deny the satisfaction she took in having silenced the interdepartmental babble about the table. It was Bernadette, Trevor's assistant in the History Department, who broke the agonizing hush.

"When was this?"

"During the summer," Helen told her.

"I don't recall reading about it," said Archie, much the better for two hours of drinking; it mellowed a tongue which was otherwise fulsome in its self-coruscation.

"Perhaps the police are suppressing it," Daniel commented.

"Conspiracy?" said Trevor, plainly cynical.

"It's happening all the time," Daniel shot back.

"Why should they suppress something like this?" Helen said. "It doesn't make sense."

"Since when has police procedure made sense?" Daniel replied.

Bernadette cut in before Helen could answer. "We don't even bother to read about these things any longer," she said.

"Speak for yourself," somebody piped up, but she ignored them and went on:

"We're punch-drunk with violence. We don't see it any longer, even when it's in front of our noses."

"On the screen every night," Archie put in, "Death and disaster in full colour."

"There's nothing very modern about that," Trevor said. "An Elizabethan would have seen death all the time. Public executions were a very popular form of entertainment."

The table broke up into a cacophony of opinions. After two hours of polite gossip the dinner-party had suddenly caught fire. Listening to the debate rage Helen was sorry she hadn't had time to have the photographs processed and printed; the graffiti would have added further fuel to this exhilarating row. It was Purcell, as usual, who was the last to weigh in with his point of view; and - again, as usual - it was devastating.

"Of course, Helen, my sweet -" he began, that affected weariness in his voice edged with the anticipation of controversy - "your witnesses could all be lying, couldn't they?"

The talking around the table dwindled, and all heads turned in Purcell's direction. Perversely, he ignored the attention he'd garnered, and turned to whisper in the ear of the boy he'd brought - a new passion who would, on past form, be discarded in a matter of weeks for another pretty urchin.

"Lying?" Helen said. She could feel herself bristling at the observation already, and Purcell had only spoken a dozen words.

"Why not?" the other replied, lifting his glass of wine to his lips. "Perhaps they're all weaving some elaborate fiction or other. The story of the spastic's

mutilation in the public toilet. The murderer of the old man. Even that hook. All quite familiar elements. You must be aware that there's something *traditional* about these atrocity stories. One used to exchange them all the time; there was a certain *frisson* in them. Something competitive maybe, in attempting to find a new detail to add to the collective fiction; a fresh twist that would render the tale that little bit more appalling when you passed it on."

"It may be familiar to you -" said Helen defensively. Purcell was always so *poised*; it irritated her. Even if there were validity in his argument - which she doubted - she was damned if she'd concede it. "- I've never heard this kind of story before."

"Have you not?" said Purcell, as though she were admitting to illiteracy. "What about the lovers and the escaped lunatic, have you heard that one?"

"I've heard that..." Daniel said.

"The lover is disembowelled - usually by a hook-handed man - and the body left on the top of the car, while the fiancée cowers inside. It's a cautionary tale, warning of the evils of rampant heterosexuality." The joke won a round of laughter from everyone but Helen. "These stories are very common."

"So you're saying that they're telling me lies -" she protested.

"Not lies, exactly -"

"You said *lies*."

"I was being provocative," Purcell returned, his placatory tone more enraging than ever. "I don't mean to imply there's any serious mischief in it. But you *must* concede that so far you haven't met a single *witness*. All these events have happened at some unspecified date to some unspecified person. They are reported at several removes. They occurred at best to the brothers of friends of distant relations. Please consider the possibility that perhaps these events do not exist in the real world at all, but are merely titillation for bored housewives -"

Helen didn't make an argument in return, for the simple reason that she lacked one. Purcell's point about the conspicuous absence of witnesses was perfectly sound; she herself had wondered about it. It was strange, too, the way the women in Ruskin Court had speedily consigned the old man's murder to another estate, as though these atrocities

always occurred just out of sight - round the next corner, down the next passageway - but never *here*.

"So why?" said Bernadette.

"Why what?" Archie puzzled.

"The stories. Why tell these horrible stories if they're not true?"

"Yes," said Helen, throwing the controversy back into Purcell's ample lap.

"Why?"

Purcell preened himself, aware that his entry into the debate had changed the basic assumption at a stroke. "I don't know," he said, happy to be done with the game now that he'd shown his arm. "You really mustn't take me too seriously, Helen. I try not to." The boy at Purcell's side tittered.

"Maybe it's simply taboo material," Archie said.

"Suppressed -" Daniel prompted.

"Not the way you mean it," Archie retorted. "The whole world isn't politics, Daniel."

"Such naiveté."

"What's so *taboo* about death?" Trevor said. "Bernadette already pointed out: It's in front of us all the time. Television; newspapers."

"Maybe that's not close enough," Bernadette suggested.

"Does anyone mind if I smoke?" Purcell broke in. "Only dessert seems to have been indefinitely postponed -"

Helen ignored the remark, and asked Bernadette what she meant by 'not close enough'?

Bernadette shrugged. "I don't know precisely," she confessed, "maybe just that death has to be *near*; we have to *know* it's just round the corner. The television's not intimate enough -"

Helen frowned. The observation made some sense to her, but in the clutter of the moment she couldn't root out its significance.

"Do you think they're stories too?" she asked.

"Andrew has a point -" Bernadette replied.

"Most kind," said Purcell. "Has somebody got a match? The boy's pawned my lighter."

"- about the absence of witnesses."

"All that proves is that I haven't met anybody who's actually *seen* anything," Helen countered, "not that witnesses don't exist."

"All right," said Purcell. "Find me one. If you can prove to me that your atrocity-

monger actually lives and breathes, I'll stand everyone dinner at *Appollinaires*. How's that? Am I generous to a fault, or do I just know when I can't lose?" He laughed, knocking on the table with his knuckles by way of applause.

"Sounds good to me," said Trevor. "What do you say, Helen?"

SHE didn't go back to Spector Street until the following Monday, but all week-end she was there in thought: Standing outside the locked toilet, with the wind bringing rain; or in the bedroom, the portrait looming. Thoughts of the estate claimed all her concern. When, late on Saturday afternoon, Trevor found some petty reason for an argument, she let the insults pass, watching him perform the familiar ritual of self-martyrdom without being touched by it in the least. Her indifference only enraged him further. He stormed out in high dudgeon, to visit whichever of his women was in favour this month. She was glad to see the back of him. When he failed to return that night she didn't even think of weeping about it. He was foolish and vacuous. She despaired of ever seeing a haunted look in his dull eyes; and what worth was a man who could not be haunted?

He did not return Sunday night either, and it crossed her mind the following morning, as she parked the car in the heart of the estate, that nobody even knew she had come, and that she might lose herself for days here and nobody be any the wiser. Like the old man Anne-Marie had told her about: Lying forgotten in his favourite armchair with his eyes hooked out, while the flies feasted and the butter went rancid on the table.

It was almost Bonfire Night, and over the weekend the small heap of combustibles in Butts' Court had grown to a substantial size. The construction looked unsound, but that didn't prevent a number of boys and young adolescents clambering over it and into it. Much of its bulk was made up of furniture, filched, no doubt, from boarded-up properties. She doubted if it could burn for any time: If it did, it would go chokingly. Four times, on her way across to Anne-Marie's house, she was waylaid by children begging for money to buy fireworks.

"Penny for the guy," they'd say, though none had a guy to display. She had emptied her pockets of change by the time she reached the front door.

Anne-Marie was in today, though there was no welcoming smile. She simply stared at her visitor as if mesmerised.

"I hope you don't mind me calling..."

Anne-Marie made no reply.

"...I just wanted a word."

"I'm busy," the woman finally announced. There was no invitation inside, no offer of tea.

"Oh. Well...it won't take more than a moment."

The back door was open and the draught blew through the house. Papers were flying about in the back yard. Helen could see them lifting into the air like vast white moths.

"What do you want?" Anne-Marie asked.

"Just to ask you about the old man."

The woman frowned minutely. She looked as if she was sickening, Helen thought: Her face had the colour and texture of stale dough, her hair was lank and greasy.

"What old man?"

"Last time I was here, you told me about an old man who'd been murdered, do you remember?"

"No."

"You said he lived in the next court."

"I don't remember," Anne-Marie said.

"But you *distinctly* told me -"

Something fell to the floor in the kitchen, and smashed. Anne-Marie flinched, but did not move from the doorstep, her arm barring Helen's way into the house. The hallway was littered with the child's toys, gnawed and battered.

"Are you all right?"

Anne-Marie nodded. "I've got work to do," she said.

"And you don't remember telling me about the old man?"

"You must have misunderstood," Anne-Marie replied, and then, her voice hushed: "You shouldn't have come. Everybody *knows*."

"Knows what?"

The girl had begun to tremble. "You don't understand, do you? You think people aren't watching?"

"What does it matter? All I asked was -"

"I don't know *anything*," Anne-Marie reiterated. "Whatever I said to you, I lied about it."

"Well, thank you anyway," Helen said, too perplexed by the confusion of signals from Anne-Marie to press the point any further. Almost as soon as she had turned from the door she heard the lock snap closed behind her.

That conversation was only one of several disappointments that morning brought.

She went back to the row of shops, and visited the supermarket that Josie had spoken of. There she inquired about the lavatories, and their recent history. The supermarket had only changed hands in the last month, and the new owner, a taciturn Pakistani, insisted that he knew nothing of when or why the lavatories had been closed. She was aware, as she made her enquiries, of being scrutinized by the other customers in the shop; she felt like a pariah. That feeling deepened when, after leaving the supermarket, she saw Josie emerging from the launderette, and called after her only to have the woman pick up her pace and duck away into the maze of corridors. Helen followed, but rapidly lost both her quarry and her way.

Frustrated to the verge of tears, she stood amongst the overturned rubbish bags, and felt a surge of contempt for her foolishness. She didn't belong here, did she? How many times had she criticized others for their presumption in claiming to understand societies they had merely viewed from afar? And here was she, committing the same crime, coming here with her camera and her questions, using the lives (and deaths) of these people as fodder for party conversation. She didn't blame Anne-Marie for turning her back; had she deserved better?

Tired and chilled, she decided it was time to concede Purcell's point. It was all fiction she had been told. They had played with her - sensing her desire to be fed some horrors - and she, the perfect fool, had fallen for every ridiculous word. It was time to pack up her credulity and go home.

One call demanded to be made before she returned to the car however: She wanted to look a final time at the painted head. Not as an anthropologist amongst an alien tribe, but as a confessed ghost train rider: For the thrill of it. Arriving at number 14, however, she faced the last and most crushing disappointment. The maisonette had been sealed up by conscientious council workman. The door was locked; the front window boarded over.

She was determined not to be so easily defeated however. She made her way around the back of Butt's Court and located the yard of number 14 by simple mathematics. The gate was wedged closed from the inside, but she pushed hard upon it, and, with effort on both parts, it opened. A heap of rubbish - rotted carpets, a box of rain-sodden magazines, a denuded

Christmas tree - had blocked it.

She crossed the yard to the boarded-up windows, and peered through the slats of wood. It wasn't bright outside, but it was darker still within; it was difficult to catch more than the vaguest hint of the painting on the bedroom wall. She pressed her face close to the wood, eager for a final glimpse.

A shadow moved across the room, momentarily blocking her view. She stepped back from the window, startled, not certain of what she'd seen. Perhaps merely her own shadow, cast through the window? But then *she* hadn't moved; it had.

She approached the window again, more cautiously. The air vibrated; she could hear a muted whine from somewhere, though she couldn't be certain whether it came from inside or out. Again, she put her face to the rough boards, and suddenly, something leapt at the window. This time she let out a cry. There was a scrabbling sound from within, as nails raked the wood.

A dog! - And a big one to have jumped so high.

"Stupid," she told herself aloud. A sudden sweat bathed her.

The scrabbling had stopped almost as soon as it had started, but she couldn't bring herself to go back to the window. Clearly the workmen who had sealed up the maisonette had failed to check it properly, and incarcerated the animal by mistake. It was ravenous, to judge by the slaverling she'd heard; she was grateful she hadn't attempted to break in. The dog - hungry, maybe half-mad in the stinking darkness - could have taken out her throat.

She stared at the boarded-up window. The slits between the boards were barely a half-inch wide, but she sensed that the animal was up on its hind legs on the other side, watching her through the gap. She could hear its panting now that her own breath was regularizing; she could hear its claws raking the sill.

"Bloody thing..." she said. "Damn well stay in there."

She backed off towards the gate. Hosts of wood-lice and spiders, disturbed from their nests by moving the carpets behind the gate, were scurrying underfoot, looking for a fresh darkness to call home.

She closed the gate behind her, and was making her way around the front of the block when she heard the sirens; two ugly spirals of sound that made the hair on the back of her neck tingle. They were approaching. She picked up her speed,

and came round into Butts' Court in time to see several policemen crossing the grass behind the bonfire and an ambulance mounting the pavement and driving around to the other side of the quadrangle. People had emerged from their flats and were standing on their balconies, staring down. Others were walking around the court, nakedly curious, to join a gathering congregation. Helen's stomach seemed to drop to her bowels when she realized where the hub of interest lay: At Anne-Marie's doorstep. The police were clearing a path through the throng for the ambulance men. A second police-car had followed the route of the ambulance onto the pavement; two plain-clothes officers were getting out.

She walked to the periphery of the crowd. What little talk there was amongst the on-lookers was conducted in low voices; one or two of the older women were crying. Though she peered over the heads of the spectators she could see nothing. Turning to a bearded man, whose child was perched on his shoulders, she asked what was going on. He didn't know. Somebody dead, he'd heard, but he wasn't certain.

"Anne-Marie?" she asked.

A woman in front of her turned and said: "You know her?" almost awed, as if speaking of a loved one.

"A little," Helen replied hesitantly. "Can you tell me what's happened?"

The woman involuntarily put her hand to her mouth, as if to stop the words before they came. But here they were nevertheless: "The child -" she said.

"Kerry?"

"Somebody got into the house around the back. Slit his throat."

Helen felt the sweat come again. In her mind's eye the newspapers rose and fell in Anne-Marie's yard.

"No," she said.

"Just like that."

She looked at the tragedian who was trying to sell her this obscenity, and said, "No," again. It defied belief; yet her denials could not silence the horrid comprehension she felt.

She turned her back on the woman and paddled her way out of the crowd. There would be nothing to see, she knew, and even if there had been, she had no desire to look. These people - still emerging from their homes as the story spread - were exhibiting an appetite she was disgusted by. She was not of them; would never be of them. She wanted to slap every eager face into sense; wanted to

say: "It's pain and grief you're going to spy on. Why? Why?" But she had no courage left. Revulsion had drained her of all but the energy to wander away, leaving the crowd to its sport.

TREVOR had come home. He did not attempt an explanation of his absence, but waited for her to cross-question him. When she failed to do so he sank into an easy *bonhomie* that was worse than his expectant silence. She was dimly aware that her disinterest was probably more unsettling for him than the histrionics he had been anticipating. She couldn't have cared less.

She tuned the radio to the local station, and listened for news. It came surely enough, confirming what the woman in the crowd had told her. Kerry Latimer was dead. Person or persons unknown had gained access to the house via the back yard and murdered the child while he played on the kitchen floor. A police spokesman mouthed the usual platitudes, describing Kerry's death as an 'unspeakable crime', and the miscreant as 'a dangerous and deeply disturbed individual'. For once, the rhetoric seemed justified, and the man's voice shook discernibly when he spoke of the scene that had confronted the officers in the kitchen of Anne-Marie's house.

"Why the radio?" Trevor casually inquired, when Helen had listened for news through three consecutive bulletins. She saw no point in withholding her experience at Spector Street from him; he would find out sooner or later. Coolly, she gave him a bald outline of what had happened at Butts' Court.

"This Anne-Marie is the woman you first met when you went to the estate; am I right?"

She nodded, hoping he wouldn't ask her too many questions. Tears were close, and she had no intention of breaking down in front of him.

"So you were right," he said.

"Right?"

"About the place having a maniac."

"No," she said. "No."

"But the kid -"

She got up and stood at the window, looking down two storeys into the darkened street below. Why did she feel the need to reject the conspiracy theory so urgently? Why was she now praying that Purcell had been right, and that all she'd been told had been lies? She went back and back to the way Anne-Marie had been when she'd visited her that morning: Pale, jittery;

suspectant. She had been like a woman anticipating some arrival, hadn't she? - eager to shoo unwanted visitors away so that she could turn back to the business of waiting. But waiting for what, or *whom*? Was it possible that Anne-Marie actually knew the murderer? Had perhaps invited him into the house?

"I hope they find the bastard," she said, still watching the street.

"They will," Trevor replied. "A baby-murderer, for Christ's sake. They'll make it a high priority."

A man appeared at the corner of the street, turned, and whistled. A large Alsatian came to heel, and the two set off down towards the Cathedral.

"The dog," Helen murmured.

"What?"

She had forgotten the dog in all that had followed. Now the shock she'd felt as it had leapt at the window shook her again.

"What dog?" Trevor pressed.

"I went back to the flat today - where I took the pictures of the graffiti. There was a dog in there. Locked in."

"So?"

"It'll starve. Nobody knows it's there."

"How do you know it wasn't locked in to kennel it?"

"It was making such a noise -" she said.

"Dogs bark," Trevor replied. "That's all they're good for."

"No..." she said very quietly, remembering the noises through the boarded window. "It didn't bark..."

"Forget the dog," Trevor said. "And the child. There's nothing you can do about it. You were just passing through."

His words only echoed her own thoughts of earlier in the day, but somehow - for reasons that she could find no words to convey - that conviction had decayed in the last hours. She was not just passing through. Nobody ever just *passed through*; experience always left its mark. Sometimes it merely scratched; on occasion it took off limbs. She did not know the extent of her present wounding, but she knew it more profound than she yet understood, and it made her afraid.

"We're out of booze," she said, emptying the last dribble of whisky into her tumbler.

Trevor seemed pleased to have a reason to be accommodating. "I'll go out, shall I?" he said. "Get a bottle or two?"

"Sure," she replied. "If you like."

He was gone only half an hour; she would have liked him to have been longer. She didn't want to talk, only to sit and

think through the unease in her belly. Though Trevor had dismissed her concern for the dog - and perhaps justifiably so - she couldn't help but go back to the locked maisonette in her mind's eye: To picture again the raging face on the bedroom wall, and hear the animal's muffled growl as it pawed the boards over the window. Whatever Trevor had said, she didn't believe the place was being used as a makeshift kennel. No, the dog was *imprisoned* in there, no doubt of it, running round and round, driven, in its desperation, to eat its own faeces, growing more insane with every hour that passed. She became afraid that somebody - kids maybe, looking for more tinder for their bonfire - would break into the place, ignorant of what it contained. It wasn't that she feared for the intruders' safety, but that the dog, once liberated, would come for her. It would know where she was (so her drunken head construed) and come sniffing her out.

Trevor returned with the whisky, and they drank together until the early hours, when her stomach revolted. She took refuge in the toilet - Trevor outside asking her if she needed anything, her telling him weakly to leave her alone. When, an hour later, she emerged, he had gone to bed. She did not join him, but lay down on the sofa and dozed through until dawn.

The murder was news. The next morning it made all the tabloids as a front page splash, and found prominent positions in the heavy-weights too. There were photographs of the stricken mother being led from the house, and others, blurred but potent, taken over the back yard wall and through the open kitchen door. Was that blood on the floor, or shadow?

Helen did not bother to read the articles - her aching head rebelled at the thought - but Trevor, who had bought the newspapers in, was eager to talk. She couldn't work out if this was further peace-making on his part, or a genuine interest in the issue.

"The woman's in custody," he said, poring over the *Daily Telegraph*. It was a paper he was politically averse to, but its coverage of violent crime was notoriously detailed.

The observation demanded Helen's attention, unwilling or not. "Custody?" she said. "Anne-Marie?"

"Yes."

"Let me see."

He relinquished the paper, and she

glanced over the page.

"Third column," Trevor prompted.

She found the place, and there it was in black and white. Anne-Marie had been taken into custody for questioning to justify the time-lapse between the estimated hour of the child's death, and the time that it had been reported. Helen read the relevant sentences over again, to be certain that she'd understood properly. Yes, she had. The police pathologist estimated Kerry to have died between six and six-thirty that morning; the murder had not been reported until twelve.

She read the report over a third and fourth time, but repetition did not change the horrid facts. The child had been murdered before dawn. When she had gone to the house that morning Kerry had already been dead four hours. The body had been in the kitchen, a few yards down the hallway from where she had stood, and Anne-Marie had said *nothing*. That air of expectancy she had had about her - what had it signified? That she awaited some cue to lift the receiver and call the police?

"My Christ..." Helen said, and let the paper drop.

"What?"

"I have to go to the police."

"Why?"

"To tell them I went to the house," she replied. Trevor looked mystified. "The baby was dead, Trevor. When I saw Anne-Marie yesterday morning, Kerry was already dead."

SHE rang the number in the paper for any persons offering information, and half an hour later a police car came to pick her up. There was much that startled her in the two hours of interrogation that followed, not least the fact that nobody had reported her presence on the estate to the police, though she had surely been noticed.

"They don't want to know -" the detective told her. "You'd think a place like that would be swarming with witnesses. If it is, they're not coming forward. A crime like this..."

"Is it the first?" she said.

He looked at her across a chaotic desk. "First?"

"I was told some stories about the estate. Murders. This summer."

The detective shook his head. "Not to my knowledge. There's been a spate of muggings; one woman was put in hospital for a week or so. But no; no murders."

She liked the detective. His eyes flattered her with their lingering, and his face with their frankness. Past caring whether she sounded foolish or not, she said: "Why do they tell lies like that? About people having their eyes cut out. Terrible things."

The detective scratched his long nose. "We get it too," he said. "People come in here, they confess to all kinds of crap. Talk all night, some of them, about things they've done, or *think* they've done. Give you it all in the minutest detail. And when you make a few calls, it's all invented. Out of their minds."

"Maybe if they didn't tell you those stories...they'd actually go out and do it."

The detective nodded. "Yes," he said. "God help us. You might be right at that."

And the stories *she'd* been told, were they confessions of uncommitted crimes? Accounts of the worst-imaginable, imagined to keep fiction from becoming fact? The thought chased its own tail: These terrible stories still needed a *first cause*, a well-spring from which they leapt. As she walked home through the busy streets she wondered how many of her fellow citizens knew such stories. Were these inventions common currency, as Purcell had claimed? Was there a place, however small, reserved in every heart for the monstrous?

"Purcell rang," Trevor told her when she got home. "To invite us out to dinner."

The invitation wasn't welcome, and she made a face.

"Appollinaires, remember?" he reminded her. "He said he'd take us all to dinner, if you proved him wrong."

The thought of getting a dinner out of the death of Anne-Marie's infant was grotesque, and she said so.

"He'll be offended if you turn him down."

"I don't give a damn. I don't want dinner with Purcell."

"Please," he said softly. "He can get difficult; and I want to keep him smiling just at the moment."

She glanced across at him. The look he'd put on made him resemble a drenched spaniel. Manipulative bastard, she thought; but said: "All right, I'll go. But don't expect any dancing on the tables."

"We'll leave that to Archie," he said.

"I told Purcell we were free tomorrow night. Is that all right with you?"

"Whenever."

"He's booking a table for eight o'clock."

The evening papers had relegated The Tragedy of Baby Kerry to a few column inches on an inside page. In lieu of much fresh news they simply described the house-to-house enquiries that were now going on at Spector Street. Some of the later editions mentioned that Anne-Marie had been released from custody after an extended period of questioning, and was now residing with friends. They also mentioned, in passing, that the funeral was to be the following day.

Helen had not entertained any thoughts of going back to Spector Street for the funeral when she went to bed that night, but sleep seemed to change her mind, and she woke with the decision made for her.

DEATH had brought the estate to life. Walking through to Ruskin Court from the street she had never seen such numbers out and about. Many were already lining the kerb to watch the funeral cortège pass, and looked to have claimed their niche early, despite the wind and the ever-present threat of rain. Some were wearing items of black clothing - a coat, a scarf - but the overall impression, despite the lowered voices and the studied frowns, was one of celebration. Children running around, untouched by reverence; occasional laughter escaping from between gossiping adults - Helen could feel an air of anticipation which made her spirits, despite the occasion, almost buoyant.

Nor was it simply the presence of so many people that reassured her; she was, she conceded to herself, happy to be back here in Spector Street. The quadrangles, with their stunted saplings and their grey grass, were more real to her than the carpeted corridors she was used to walking; the anonymous faces on the balconies and streets meant more than her colleagues at the University. In a word, she felt *home*.

Finally, the cars appeared, moving at a snail's pace through the narrow streets. As the hearse came into view - its tiny white casket decked with flowers - a number of women in the crowd gave quiet voice to their grief. One on-looker fainted; a knot of anxious people gathered around her. Even the children were stilled now.

Helen watched, dry-eyed. Tears did not come very easily to her, especially in company. As the second car, containing Anne-Marie and two other women, drew level with her, Helen saw that the bereaved mother was also eschewing any public display of grief. She seemed, indeed, to be almost

elevated by the proceedings, sitting upright in the back of the car, her pallid features the source of much admiration. It was a sour thought, but Helen felt as though she was seeing Anne-Marie's finest hour; the one day in an otherwise anonymous life in which she was the centre of attention. Slowly, the cortège passed by and disappeared from view.

The crowd around Helen was already dispersing. She detached herself from the few mourners who still lingered at the kerb and wandered through from the street into Butts' Court. It was her intention to go back to the locked maisonette, to see if the dog was still there. If it was, she would put her mind at rest by finding one of the estate caretakers and informing him of the fact.

The quadrangle was, unlike the other courts, practically empty. Perhaps the residents, being neighbours of Anne-Marie's, had gone on to the Crematorium for the service. Whatever the reason, the place was eerily deserted. Only children remained, playing around the pyramid bonfire, their voices echoing across the empty expanse of the square.

She reached the maisonette and was surprised to find the door open again, as it had been the first time she'd come here. The sight of the interior made her light-headed. How often in the past several days had she imagined standing here, gazing into that darkness. There was no sound from inside. The dog had surely run off; either that, or died. There could be no harm, could there? in stepping into the place one final time, just to look at the face on the wall, and its attendant slogan.

Sweets to the sweet. She had never looked up the origins of that phrase. No matter, she thought. Whatever it had stood for once, it was transformed here, as everything was; herself included. She stood in the front room for a few moments, to allow herself time to savour the confrontation ahead. Far away behind her the children were screeching like mad birds.

She stepped over a clutter of furniture and towards the short corridor that joined living-room to bedroom, still delaying the moment. Her heart was quick in her: A smile played on her lips.

And there! At last! The portrait loomed, compelling as ever. She stepped back in the murky room to admire it more fully and her heel caught on the mattress that still lay in the corner. She glanced down. The squalid bedding had been turned over, to

present its untorn face. Some blankets and a rag-wrapped pillow had been tossed over it. Something glistened amongst the folds of the uppermost blanket. She bent down to look more closely and found there a handful of sweets - chocolate and caramels - wrapped in bright paper. And littered amongst them, neither so attractive nor so sweet, a dozen razor-blades. There was blood on several. She stood up again and backed away from the mattress, and as she did so a buzzing sound reached her ears from the next room. She turned, and the light in the bedroom diminished as a figure stepped into the gullet between her and the outside world. Silhouetted against the light, she could scarcely see the man in the doorway, but she smelt him. He smelt like candy-floss; and the buzzing was with him or in him.

"I just came to look -" she said, "- at the picture."

The buzzing went on: The sound of a sleepy afternoon, far from here. The man in the doorway did not move.

"Well..." she said, "I've seen what I wanted to see." She hoped against hope that her words would prompt him to stand aside and let her pass, but he didn't move, and she couldn't find the courage to challenge him by stepping towards the door.

"I have to go," she said, knowing that despite her best efforts fear seeped between every syllable. "I'm expected..."

That was not entirely untrue. Tonight they were all invited to Appollinaires for dinner. But that wasn't until eight, which was four hours away. She would not be missed for a long while yet.

"If you'll excuse me," she said.

The buzzing had quietened a little, and in the hush the man in the doorway spoke. His unaccented voice was almost as sweet as his scent.

"No need to leave yet," he breathed.

"I'm due...due..."

Though she couldn't see his eyes, she felt them on her, and they made her feel drowsy, like that summer that sang in her head.

"I came for you," he said.

She repeated the four words in her head. *I came for you.* If they were meant as a threat, they certainly weren't spoken as one.

"I don't...know you," she said.

"No," the man murmured. "But you doubted me."

"Doubted?"

"You weren't content with the stories,

with what they wrote on the walls. So I was obliged to come."

The drowsiness slowed her mind to a crawl, but she grasped the essentials of what the man was saying. That he was legend, and she, in disbelieving him, had obliged him to show his hand. She looked, now, down at those hands. One of them was missing. In its place, a hook.

"There will be some blame," he told her. "They will say your doubts shed innocent blood. But I say - what's blood for, if not for shedding? And in time the scrutiny will pass. The police will leave, the cameras will be pointed at some fresh horror, and they will be left alone, to tell stories of the Candyman again."

"Candyman?" she said. Her tongue could barely shape that blameless word.

"I came for you," he murmured so softly that seduction might have been in the air. And so saying, he moved through the passageway and into the light.

She knew him, without doubt. She had known him all along, in that place kept for terrors. It was the man on the wall. His portrait painter had not been a fantasist: The picture that howled over her was matched in each extraordinary particular by the man she now set eyes upon. He was bright to the point of gaudiness: His flesh a waxy yellow, his thin lips pale blue, his wild eyes glittering as if their irises were set with rubies. His jacket was a patchwork, his trousers the same. He looked, she thought, almost ridiculous, with his blood-stained motley, and the hint of rouge on his jaundiced cheeks. But people were facile. They needed these shows and shams to keep their interest. Miracles; murders; demons driven out and stones rolled from tombs. The cheap glamour did not taint the sense beneath. It was only, in the natural history of the mind, the bright feathers that drew the species to mate with its secret self.

And she was almost enchanted. By his voice, by his colours, by the buzz from his body. She fought to resist the rapture, though. There was a *monstrer* here, beneath this fetching display; its nest of razors was at her feet, still drenched in blood. Would it hesitate to slit her own throat if it once laid hands on her?

As the Candyman reached for her she dropped down and snatched the blanket up, flinging it at him. A rain of razors and sweetmeats fell around his shoulders. The blanket followed, blinding him. But before she could snatch the moment to slip past

him, the pillow which had lain on the blanket rolled in front of her.

It was not a pillow at all. Whatever the forlorn white casket she had seen in the hearse had contained, it was not the body of Baby Kerry. That was *here*, at her feet, its blood-drained face turned up to her. He was naked. His body showed everywhere signs of the fiend's attentions.

In the two heartbeats she took to register this last horror, the Candyman threw off the blanket. In his struggle to escape from its folds, his jacket had come unbuttoned, and she saw - though her senses protested - that the contents of his torso had rotted away, and the hollow was now occupied by a nest of bees. They swarmed in the vault of his chest, and encrusted in a seething mass the remnants of flesh that hung there. He smiled at her plain repugnance.

"Sweets to the sweet," he murmured, and stretched his hooked hand towards her face. She could no longer see light from the outside world, nor hear the children playing in Butts' Court. There was no escape into a saner world than this. The Candyman filled her sight; her drained limbs had no strength to hold him at bay.

"Don't kill me," she breathed.

"Do you believe in me?" he said.

She nodded minutely. "How can I not?" she said.

"Then why do you want to live?"

She didn't understand, and was afraid her ignorance would prove fatal, so she said nothing.

"If you would learn," the fiend said, "just a *little* from me...you would not beg to live." His voice had dropped to a whisper. "I am rumour," he sang in her ear. "It's a blessed condition, believe me. To live in people's dreams; to be whispered at street-corners; but not have to be. Do you understand?"

Her weary body understood. Her nerves, tired of jangling, understood. The sweetness he offered was life without living: Was to be dead, but remembered everywhere; immortal in gossip and graffiti.

"Be my victim," he said.

"No..." she murmured.

"I won't force it upon you," he replied, the perfect gentleman. "I won't oblige you to die. But think; *think*. If I kill you here - if I unhook you..." he traced the path of the promised wound with his hook. It ran from groin to neck. "Think how they would mark this place with their talk... point it out as they passed by and say:

'She died there; the woman with the green eyes'. Your death would be a parable to frighten children with. Lovers would use it as an excuse to cling closer together..."

She had been right: This was a seduction.

"Was fame ever so easy?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'd prefer to be forgotten," she replied, "than be remembered like that."

He made a tiny shrug. "What do they know?" he said. "Except what the bad teach them by their excesses?" He raised his hooked hand. "I said I would not oblige you to die and I'm true to my word. Allow me, though, a kiss at least..."

He moved towards her. She murmured some nonsensical threat, which he ignored. The buzzing in his body had risen in volume. The thought of touching his body, of the proximity of the insects, was horrid. She forced her lead-heavy arms up to keep him at bay.

His lurid face eclipsed the portrait on the wall. She couldn't bring herself to touch him, and instead stepped back. The sound of the bees rose; some, in their excitement, had crawled up his throat and were flying from his mouth. They climbed about his lips; in his hair.

She begged him over and over to leave her alone, but he would not be placated. At last she had nowhere left to retreat to; the wall was at her back. Steeling herself against the stings, she put her hands on his crawling chest and pushed. As she did so his hand shot out and around the back of her neck, the hook nicking the flushed skin of her throat. She felt blood come; felt certain he would open her jugular in one terrible slash. But he had given his word: And he was true to it.

Aroused by this sudden activity, the bees were everywhere. She felt them moving on her, searching for morsels of wax in her ears, and sugar at her lips. She made no attempt to swat them away. The hook was at her neck. If she so much as moved it would wound her. She was trapped, as in her childhood nightmares, with every chance of escape stymied. When sleep had brought her to such hopelessness - the demons on every side, waiting to tear her limb from limb - one trick remained. To let go; to give up all ambition to life, and leave her body to the dark. Now, as the Candyman's face pressed to hers, and the sound of bees blotted out even her own breath, she played that hidden hand. And, as surely as in dreams, the room and the fiend were

painted out and gone.

SHE woke from brightness into dark. There were several panicked moments when she couldn't think of where she was, then several more when she remembered. But there was no pain about her body. She put her hand to her neck; it was, barring the nick of the hook, untouched. She was lying on the mattress she realized. Had she been assaulted as she lay in a faint? Gingerly, she investigated her body. She was not bleeding; her clothes were not disturbed. The Candyman had, it seemed, simply claimed his kiss.

She sat up. There was precious little light through the boarded window - and none from the front door. Perhaps it was closed, she reasoned. But no; even now she heard somebody whispering on the threshold. A woman's voice.

She didn't move. They were crazy, these people. They had known all along what her presence in Butts' Court had summoned, and they had *protected* him - this honeyed psychopath; given him a bed and an offering of bonbons, hidden him away from prying eyes, and kept their silence when he brought blood to their doorsteps. Even Anne-Marie, dry-eyed in the hallway of her house, knowing that her child was dead a few yards away.

The child! That was the evidence she needed. Somehow they had conspired to get the body from the casket (what had they substituted; a dead dog?) and brought it here - to the Candyman's tabernacle - as a toy, or a lover. She would take Baby Kerry with her - to the police - and tell the whole story. Whatever they believed of it - and that would probably be very little - the fact of the child's body was incontestable. That way at least some of the crazies would suffer for their conspiracy. Suffer for *her* suffering.

The whispering at the door had stopped. Now somebody was moving towards the bedroom. They didn't bring a light with them. Helen made herself small, hoping she might escape attention.

A figure appeared in the doorway. The gloom was too impenetrable for her to make out more than a slim figure, who bent down and picked up a bundle on the floor. A fall of blonde hair identified the newcomer as Anne-Marie: The bundle she was picking up was undoubtedly Kerry's corpse. Without looking in Helen's direction, the mother about-turned and made her way out of the bedroom.

Helen listened as the footsteps receded

across the living room. Swiftly, she got to her feet, and crossed to the passage-way. From there she could vaguely see Anne-Marie's outline in the doorway of the maisonette. No lights burned in the quadrangle beyond. The woman disappeared and Helen followed as speedily as she could, eyes fixed on the door ahead. She stumbled once, and once again, but reached the door in time to see Anne-Marie's vague form in the night ahead.

She stepped out of the maisonette and into the open air. It was chilly; there were no stars. All the lights on the balconies and corridors were out, nor did any burn in the flats; not even the glow of a television. Butts' Court was deserted.

She hesitated before going in pursuit of the girl. Why didn't she slip away now, cowardice coaxed her, and find her way back to the car? But if she did that the conspirators would have time to conceal the child's body. When she got back here with the police there would be sealed lips and shrugs, and she would be told she had imagined the corpse and the Candyman. All the terrors she had tasted would recede into rumour again. Into words on a wall. And every day she lived from now on she would loathe herself for not going in pursuit of sanity.

She followed. Anne-Marie was not making her way around the quadrangle, but moving towards the centre of the lawn in the middle of the court. To the bonfire! Yes; to the bonfire! It loomed in front of Helen now, blacker than the night-sky. She could just make out Anne-Marie's figure, moving to the edge of the piled timbers and furniture, and ducking to climb into its heart. *This* was how they planned to remove the evidence. To bury the child was not certain enough; but to cremate it, and pound the bones - who would ever know?

She stood a dozen yards from the pyramid and watched as Anne-Marie climbed out again and moved away, folding her figure into the darkness.

Quickly, Helen moved through the long grass and located the narrow space in amongst the piled timbers into which Anne-Marie had put the body. She thought she could see the pale form; it had been laid in a hollow. She couldn't reach it however. Thanking God that she was as slim as the mother, she squeezed through the narrow aperture. Her dress snagged on a nail as she did so. She turned round to disengage it, fingers trembling. When she turned back she had lost sight of the corpse.

She fumbled blindly ahead of her, her hands finding wood and rags and what felt like the back of an old armchair, but not the cold skin of the child. She had hardened herself against contact with the body: She had endured worse in the last hours than picking up a dead baby. Determined not to be defeated, she advanced a little further, her shins scraped and her fingers spiked with splinters. Flashes of light were appearing at the corners of her aching eyes; her blood whined in her ears. But there! *there!* the body was no more a yard and a half ahead of her. She ducked down to reach beneath a beam of wood, but her fingers missed the forlorn bundle by millimetres. She stretched further, the whine in her head increasing, but still she could not reach the child. All she could do was bend double and squeeze into the hidey-hole the children had left in the centre of the bonfire.

It was difficult to get through. The space was so small she could barely crawl on hands and knees; but she made it. The child lay face down. She fought back the remnants of squeamishness and went to pick it up. As she did so, something landed on her arm. The shock startled her. She almost cried out, but swallowed the urge, and brushed the irritation away. It buzzed as it rose from her skin. The whine she had heard in her ears was not her blood, but the hive.

"I knew you'd come," the voice behind her said, and a wide hand covered her face. She fell backwards and the Candyman embraced her.

"We have to go," he said in her ear, as flickering light spilled between the stacked timbers. "Be on our way, you and I."

She fought to be free of him, to cry out for them not to light the bonfire, but he held her lovingly close. The light grew: Warmth came with it; and through the kindling and the first flames she could see figures approaching the pyre out of the darkness of Butts' Court. They had been there all along: Waiting, the lights turned out in their homes, and broken all along the corridors. Their final conspiracy.

The bonfire caught with a will, but by some trick of its construction the flames did not invade her hiding-place quickly; nor did the smoke creep through the furniture to choke her. She was able to watch

how the children's faces gleamed; how the parents called them from going too close, and how they disobeyed; how the old women, their blood thin, warmed their hands and smiled into the flames. Presently the roar and the crackle became deafening, and the Candyman let her scream herself hoarse in the certain knowledge that nobody could hear her, and even if they had, would not have moved to claim her from the fire.

The bees vacated the fiend's belly as the air became hotter, and mazed the air with their panicked flight. Some, attempting escape, caught fire, and fell like tiny meteors to the ground. The body of Baby Kerry, which lay close to the creeping flames, began to cook. Its downy hair smoked, it back blistered.

Soon the heat crept down Helen's throat, and scorched her pleas away. She sank back, exhausted, into the Candyman's arms, resigned to his triumph. In moments they would be on their way, as he had promised, and there was no help for it.

Perhaps they would remember her, as he had said they might, finding her cracked skull in tomorrow's ashes. Perhaps she might become, in time, a story with which to frighten children. She had lied, saying she preferred death to such questionable fame; she did not. As to her seducer, he laughed as the conflagration sniffed them out. There was no permanence for him in this night's death. His deeds were on a hundred walls and ten thousand lips, and should he be doubted again his congregation could summon him with sweetness. He had reason to laugh. So, as the flames crept upon them, did she, as through the fire she caught sight of a familiar face moving between the on-lookers. It was Trevor. He had forsaken his meal at Appollinaires and come looking for her.

She watched him questioning this fire-watcher and that, but they shook their heads, all the while staring at the pyre with smiles buried in their eyes. Poor dupe she thought, following his antics. She willed him to look past the flames in the hope he might see her burning. Not so that he could save her from death - she was long past hope of that - but because she pitied him in his bewilderment and wanted to give him, though he would not have thanked her for it, something to be haunted by. That, and a story to tell.



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"They were grotesquely mutilated."

The Other Side

By C. BRUCE
HUNTER

Illustration by
ALLEN KOSZOWSKI

Revenge of the Dead...

DON Alberto trudged through the mist, squinting to keep track of the hooded figure who marched steadily ahead of him and occasionally sniffing the air for traces of brimstone that somehow weren't there. The place was not what he expected. It didn't matter, though. He was ready to go; he had already cheated Death for more than a decade.

That was one of the benefits of being wealthy. He could afford the very best in health care and was always first in line for transplants. His heart had gone first. Since then there were two kidney failures, new corneas to fix his cataracts, and half-a-dozen other operations along the way.

With so many problems, being a top man in the Mob didn't hurt, either. It meant that he could always find a donor - willing or unwilling - if he needed one.

When the end finally did come, when he was no longer able to keep his body functioning, the Don went without protest. Death was so much a part of his business that he had long ago stopped fearing it, and his own death had come almost as a pleasant surprise. He couldn't quite remember the transition from the hospital bed to...to wherever he was now. He had simply become aware of being led by a hooded figure across an endless expanse of ankle-deep mud shrouded by endless sheets of mist.

All things considered, the place wasn't as bad as he'd expected. The mist didn't bother him. He wasn't curious to know what might be around him. And the mud, if that's what it was, was cold but not unpleasant. At least there was no fire and brimstone, just the mist, the mud, and of

course the hooded figure he had instinctively known he was supposed to follow. It could be a lot worse.

THEN he heard the sounds. They were squishy, splashing sounds and they were coming steadily closer. Patches of dark grey soon dotted the mist, and as the squishes became louder, the patches blackened and gradually crystalized into more or less human shapes.

Don Alberto winced when they came out of the mist. They were human but grotesquely mutilated. A dozen of them appeared on all sides, surrounding him and leaving no way of escape. The nearest grinned at him, but it wasn't a grin. As the creature moved closer, the Don saw that what looked like a grin was actually the effect of muscles contorted around an empty eye socket. Terrified by the sight, he turned to run but was immediately confronted by another, whose emaciated abdomen was split from hip to naval, and one whose chest had ruptured hideously. Others followed and quickly closed around him.

"It's inevitable," the hooded figure said calmly, turning to reveal a face whose shrunken skin gave it the appearance of a skull.

"What do they want?" the Don rasped as the creatures reached for him, but he barely heard the answer over the sounds of tearing flesh.

"They've come," the hooded figure said, "to get their organs back."

C. Bruce Hunter's short story you have just read originally appeared in the November 1982 issue of *The Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*. Other recent fiction from his pen includes *The Pawn Ticket* in *Woman's World* (March 1984), *The Legend of Santa Claus in Whispers* (October 1983) and *Best Laid Plans*, published in a Norwegian magazine, *Zealot* (September 1984). Outside of fantasy, Bruce (with Allen L. Wold) has been software review editor for *Media and Methods*, a leading magazine for educators. They have also co-edited *The New Webster's Computer Dictionary* (Delair 1984). Bruce has previously appeared in *Fantasy Tales* with *To Welcome One of Their Own* (issue 11) and another short short, *Pharaoh's Revenge* (issue 12).



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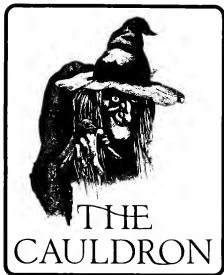
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AS MANY of you probably know by now, we are the proud possessors of World Fantasy Award statuettes! *Fantasy Tales* was among the final nominations in the Special Award - Non-Professional category for 1984, along with other contenders Robert Collins (*Fantasy Newsletter*), W. Paul Ganley (*Weirdbook*), Robert Price (*Crypt of Cthulhu*), and Douglas Winter. The presentation was made at the World Fantasy Convention in Ottawa last October to Steve Jones, and later Dave Sutton received his statuette (a creepy bust of H.P. Lovecraft designed by Gahan Wilson) at one of the British Fantasy Society's London Open Nights. Needless to say, we are extremely proud that *FT* won this prestigious award - especially as we have been nominated so many times! We do, of course, extend our thanks to everyone who filled in their reader ballots and to the WFA judges for last year (Ellen Asher, Ginger Buchanan, Mimi Panitch, Les Daniels and George H. Scithers). Not forgetting Peter D. Pautz, President of the World Fantasy Awards Association... However, very special thanks must go to Jo Fletcher (who works as an almost uncredited 'third editor'), Brian Mooney for all his help on the early issues and the long-standing support of our readers and contributors.

We like to hear that stories first published in *Fantasy Tales* have appeared elsewhere later on, and can report that

William F. Nolan's *Of Time and Kathy Benedict* (from our last issue) has appeared in Doubleday's hardcover collection, *Whispers V*, and Kelvin Jones' story *The Green Man*, published in *FT* 12, was reprinted in Charles L. Grant's paperback collection *Midnight* (Tor Books).

This is our second full-colour covered issue, and we can definitely state that our hopes in this area have been fulfilled and the trend of a better-looking magazine will continue. Meanwhile, yet another back issue has gone out-of-print from us - *FT* 6 is no longer available from the editorial address (an s.a.e. will bring you details of those issues still in print). Avid readers who can't wait for the next issue will be pleased to know that we plan to bring out number 15 later this year, making three issues published within twelve months, hopefully marking a return to a less erratic schedule...

NOT A BAD ISSUE

Peter A. Hough writes from Lowton, Warrington: "I recently received *Fantasy Tales* no.13, and frankly only one thing disappointed me about it. It seems the magazine now only comes out annually! For reader and writer alike this almost verges on the traumatic - and in a year that sees the demise of both the Horror and Ghost anthologies published by Fontana... Please give us more, and reduce that backlog of tales. First thing that hit me about the current issue was the superb full colour artwork of the cover. This new style of presentation has elevated the appearance of the magazine a lot. And the contents were of a high standard too; in fact, there wasn't a bad story amongst them. However, there were some I preferred to others. *The Generation Walts* by Charles L. Grant was the tops for me. This was a darkly beautiful tale, tautly written with a nice rounded plot. First Class. Steve Rasnic Tem's *The Bad People* was very well written, with a strong haunting theme which built up from page to page - although I did find the ending a little obscure. I enjoyed *Vigilance* and *Tongue in Cheek*, too, although in the latter I found the plot a bit thin on the ground. Mr. Bloch's story, *The Sorcerer's Jewel*, was a good read, even if I did see the end coming! I have a few reservations about William F. Nolan's *Of Time and Kathy Benedict*. It was well written but never delved below the surface of events - there was no real depth to it. The ending I found highly

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unbelievable, and made me think the story belonged in one of the Women's magazines. All in all I found the magazine excellent, and look forward to further issues (soon)."

CONTENTS DISAPPOINTING

From Roger Dard, East Victoria Park, Western Australia: "I was stunned at the appearance of the Winter 1984 (no.13) issue of *FT*. Fabian's full-colour back and front covers were dazzling, and the best to grace your magazine since its inception. It's just as well the artwork overwhelmed me, for the contents were disappointing - probably the worst line-up of fiction since you began publishing. With the exception of Bloch's story, which I had read before in *Strange Tales*, the only story worth reading was Mike Grace's *Tongue in Cheek*. Grace gave us a new slant on the vampire story, something I didn't think possible. Nolan's *Of Time and Kathy Benedict* was bland, sentimental and nostalgic, but readable. Most of the other stories were not, with *Vigilance* a real stinker in my estimation. You seem to be getting away from the true gothic *Weird Tales* style of writing and going more for modern psychological-study stories. As an old-time *Weird Tales* fan, I deplore this! Interior artwork in no.13 was generally good, with Jim Pitts (*The Bad People*) and Andrew Smith (*The Generation Walts*) the best."

HIGHER PRICE JUSTIFIED

John Pelan, from Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. writes to tell us: "Congratulations on your World Fantasy Award, it was certainly well deserved. A few comments regarding no.13: Loved the Fabian cover; I feel the higher price is justified by the addition of colour covers. I don't know if a reprint should be a lead story, but the Bloch tale is an obscure piece that deserved to be reprinted. In issue 13 the best story was easily *The Bad People* - any work by Steve Rasnic Tem that you can bring into print is always enjoyable. The artwork in your magazine continues to be outstanding, I especially liked Dave Carson's illustration for the Bloch story."

EXCELLENT ARTWORK

Nic Howard writes from Reading, Berkshire: "I thoroughly enjoyed *FT* 13. Bloch's *The Sorcerer's Jewel* took me back to the time when I read the Derleth-Lovecraft 'collaborations' in *The Shattered Room*.

The style was similar - a Lovecraftian basis, but with another author's handling. Good stuff for 1939! *Of Time and Kathy Benedict* by William Nolan was okay, I suppose, but since I like *FT* for its supernatural terror fiction, a piece of hum-drum SF like *Of Time*... didn't do anything for me at all. Not so Charles Grant's *The Generation Walts*, however. From the usual Grant opening, describing the weather at the time, through the dark side of love and relationships, via plenty of moody, Autumnal imagery (and whoever it was that said that Grant was an Autumnal writer surely hit the mark) to an ending about as subtle as a gallon of neat gin - *The Generation Walts* meant something. *Tongue in Cheek* by Mike Grace was another story with, this time, a definitely unsubtle ending. Ugh! Marvellous! The artwork this time round was excellent, with Andrew Smith, Dave Carson, Mark Dunn and Jim Pitts' story illustrations being especially memorable. It was very good to see a return to colour covers, even more so as the quality of reproduction is so much better than before."

NOT CONSISTENT

From Philip Collins, Leyton, London: "I strongly approve of these new full colour covers. The back cover was perhaps a little dark and moody, but the front cover (infinitely more important as far as the casual buyer goes) was a beauty. I must say that this was definitely not one of your more consistent issues. There was the Robert Bloch story (very wordy), Mike Grace's story (very clichéd) and the William Nolan story (very silly) on the negative side. Definitely the best story, by a long way, was *The Bad People* by Steve Rasnic Tem. Second was *The Generation Walts* and I'd place *Vigilance* third."

MOST POPULAR STORY

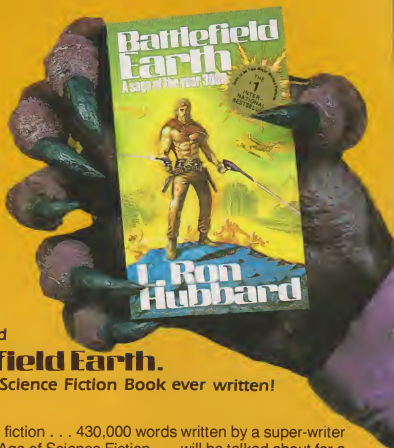
According to your votes, the most popular story in the last issue was Robert Bloch's reprint, *The Sorcerer's Jewel*. Second place was a tie between Charles L. Grant's *The Generation Walts* and Steve Rasnic Tem's *The Bad People*. *Of Time and Kathy Benedict* by William F. Nolan was third.

ARTISTS IN THIS ISSUE

Allen Koszowski illustrated *Yuggoth*. The artwork on page 27 is by Dave Carson. Jim Pitts contributed the *Contents* heading and the artwork for *The Cauldron* is courtesy of Dynamic Graphics.

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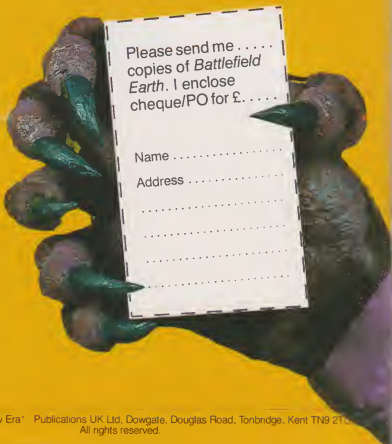
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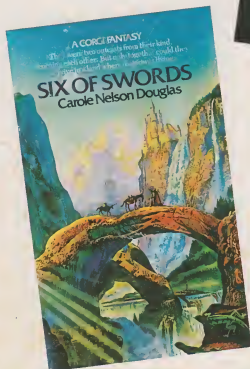
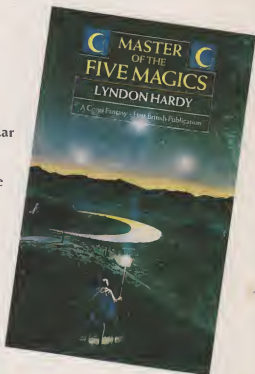
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